The New Criterion

February 1998

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Notes & Comments: February 1998

Abolish women's studies

So-called "women's studies" programs began cropping up on campuses across the country in the 1970s. Although they started largely in imitation of the militant black studies programs that had swept the country's colleges and universities in the late Sixties, they soon vastly outstripped black and other minority studies programs in size and influence. Today, there is hardly a college campus that doesn't sport a women's studies program or department. At many institutions, it is even possible to major in women's studies.

The very familiarity of these developments has lulled many people into forgetting how odd they are. For what "women's studies" describes is not an academic discipline but rather a knot of grievances searching for recognition. Like black studies and—a more recent phenomenon—homosexual ("gay") studies, women's studies exists primarily to promote a species of political solidarity. Intellectually, women's studies has always been a terrible embarrassment. That is one reason its advocates are so truculent: like the Wizard of Oz, they must work overtime to keep up the illusion that their subject even exists. Comparing what goes on in the name of women's studies to genuine scholarship is like comparing the "space program" said to have been undertaken by a small African country to compete with America's Apollo missions: there were plenty of rockets, but, being made of wood, they didn't get very far.

Sensible women know this as clearly as do sensible men. How could it be otherwise? Women's studies addresses no definable subject matter. It advances no distinct area of knowledge. It masquerades as an academic specialty, but—again like black studies and homosexual studies—women's studies is ostentatiously inimical to any serious scholarship. It rejects, in principle as well as in practice, the ideal of scholarly disinterestedness; it castigates the goal of objective knowledge as a patriarchal fiction; it seeks to refract all academic activity and institutional practice through the lens of a single guiding obsession: gender.

Most non-academics will snicker, and rightly, when told about the "scholarly" paper called "Toward a Feminist Algebra." But the contention—as one leading feminist put it—that "gender is a fundamental category of literary analysis" is no less preposterous, and yet one finds that slogan accepted as gospel in women's studies programs. If someone really wanted to do academic women a favor, he—or she—would instantly abolish all women's studies

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programs and courses. That would leave a lot of feminist radicals stranded, but at least it would rescue women from this confining intellectual ghetto.

Several recent events have prompted us to reflect anew on these matters. There were, for example, the much-publicized women's studies conferences held this winter at the State University of New York at New Paltz, which we reported on in this space in our November and December issues. These events—"Revolting Behavior: The Challenges of Women's Sexual Freedom" and "Subject to Desire: Refiguring the Body"—belong to a grotesque fringe of women's studies where antinomian politics blends with sexual desperation. Devoted to subjects like "Sex Toys for Women," "How to Get What You Want in Bed," and "Safe, Sane & Consensual S/M: An Alternate Way of Loving," they underscored the pathetic as well as preposterous aspects of women's studies.

Of course, advocates of women's studies and kindred forays into the academic sex jungle would hotly deny our assessment. But here, too, we note a large element of mendacity. On the one hand, they claim that "sex toys for women" and the rest are part of a proud, emancipatory journey, as fit a subject for academic inquiry as differential calculus. On the other hand, they know that this isn't so and are quick to dissemble whenever such events come under public scrutiny. The extent of the untruthfulness is breathtaking. On January 2, *The Times* of London ran a story about the proliferation of sex studies on American campuses. In response to rising public indignation about such institutionally sanctioned displays of perversity, *The Times* reported, some universities have begun to take "precautions to protect their graduates." A case in point is Brown University, where, according to *The Times*, "a course on 'Queers and Culture' is described on report cards . . . as 'Identities-Communities' in order not to offend potential employers." But why stop there? Why not call a course in basket weaving "nuclear physics"? Or "sex toys for women" "mechanical engineering"?

These examples show that there is much that is patently absurd about women's studies. But the fact that something is absurd does not necessarily mean it is harmless. This was brought home to us by the critic John Leo in his column in *U.S. News & World Report* for January 19. Titled "No Takeovers, Please," Mr. Leo's column reported on "Vision 2000," a document prepared by the women's studies programs at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and the five other land-grant universities of New England. Under the guise of promoting "diversity" and "gender equity," "Vision 2000" advocates the transformation of these six universities into radical feminist fiefdoms. Its nine recommendations aim at bringing every aspect of academic existence, from the curriculum and hiring of faculty to student social life, under the control of a feminist diktat.

The first recommendation, for example, ostensibly concerns fostering "accountability for gender equity." To this end, "Vision 2000" calls for student evaluations of all courses. Such evaluations are to include "measures of gender equity in course content and classroom environment. Heads of departments, schools, and colleges [are to] use these evaluations both to identify and reward superior achievement, and to identify and intervene in undesirable practices." But think about this for a moment. What would "gender equity" in a course on chemistry be? What would it be for literary history until at least the mid-eighteenth century? What would it be for the entire history of philosophy? For music? For architecture? For mathematics? Gender "equity"—by which the framers of this document mean "equal numbers of men

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and women in the underrepresented groups"—is impossible without a vast distortion of the historical record.

But it is not simply in the curriculum that "Vision 2000" wants to intervene. The document also demands that university leaders "utilize institutional research capacity to produce the data necessary to raise consciousness, instigate action, and monitor progress [toward gender equity] on our campuses." The correct translation of "produce the data necessary to raise consciousness," of course, is "*manufacture* the data to support the desired fiction."

Some of the recommendations contained in "Vision 2000" are little more than silly populist palaver—the demand, for example, that "all employees have library privileges equal to those of the faculty," or the demand that "all members of the university community have equal access to important communities and conversations." Yet why should a janitor have library privileges equal to those of a professor? Why should the president include the kitchen help in his deliberations about fundraising?

But many of the recommendations sound an ominous, indeed, a totalitarian, note. "All General Education courses," we read, are to "integrate scholarship on and by women and use content and pedagogies that are women-friendly." And if they don't? "Academic departments that consistently surface with disproportionately high female drop-out rates are penalized." There have always been far fewer women than men in the hard sciences and mathematics, but this must stop. And teachers who do not aid in stopping it will themselves be stopped: "Faculty whose students identify their courses, teaching styles, and mentoring as failing to be inclusive do not receive teaching prizes, satisfactory teaching evaluations, or merit raises."

It is tempting to dismiss "Vision 2000" as simply another feminist screed, totally out of touch with reality. The problem, as Mr. Leo points out, is that three of the five university presidents—in Vermont, Maine, and New Hampshire—have already signed on to its recommendations "in spirit." Which means that some or all of its proposals may well be enforced on their campuses. Mr. Leo is quite right that

> campus feminists, like most multiculturalists, tend to believe that all knowledge is constructed and that college women are being spoon-fed "male" or "white male" knowledge that must be deposed and replaced by "new knowledges" created by women and minorities. This world view turns the debate away from learning and toward a politicized power struggle to control the curriculum.

For the most part, women's studies programs are, as Mr. Leo puts it, "part therapy group, part training grounds for feminist cadres." He concludes by observing that "it's a close question whether these politicized outposts should be academic departments at all." In our view, however, the question is by no means close. Morally as well as intellectually, women's studies is a disaster, and one that increasingly threatens the basic integrity of the academic enterprise. Spouting the language of "equality," "diversity," and "inclusiveness," women's studies is really Orwellianism for the twenty-first century, with Big Sister standing in for Orwell's outdated male counterpart. No, the question is not close. Women's studies should not be reformed or modified or rethought. It should be abolished altogether.

Philippe de Montebello at the Met

It's a little sad that the board of trustees at the Metropolitan Museum of Art has felt obliged to drop the term "director" in naming Philippe de Montebello as the museum's new chief executive, but the

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decision itself is an excellent one. In the two decades that Mr. de Montebello has been in charge of the museum's artistic affairs, he has not only rescued our greatest museum from the extravagant follies and intellectual demoralization caused by the reckless tenure of his immediate predecessor, but he has also restored the institution to a position of leadership in the cultural life of the nation. His achievement is all the more remarkable when we compare it to the woeful decline in standards that has overtaken so many other art museums—and not only in New York, of course—in the same period.

It was the Met board itself that, some twenty years ago, demoted the office of the director to second-class status by installing a paid president as the museum's chief executive officer. This introduced a division of labor—and, what is more important, a division of authority—that was bound to cause more problems than it solved. It was never exactly a secret, moreover, that the board's decision to effect that division of authority was a direct consequence of its own failure to rein in the excesses of Mr. de Montebello's predecessor. The board, rather than acknowledge the role that its own failure in museum governance contributed to the Met's mounting problems, covered its embarrassment by announcing a change in administrative structure that was claimed to be more "democratic" than the traditional directorship. This was nothing but face-saving humbug at the time, and it has now —at last—been acknowledged to have been humbug by the new board's decision to restore full authority to what is in everything but name the traditional office of the director, who, in another face-saving stratagem by the board, will now be called the museum's chief executive officer. Exactly who is expected to be fooled by this publicity device is anyone's guess.

What made the Met's decision to demote the office of the director especially unfortunate at the time was that it lent the museum's prestige to a larger, ill-fated trend that saw book publishing houses placed in the hands of executives who knew nothing about books, universities appointing presidents who knew nothing about scholarship or learning, opera companies handed over to bureaucrats who knew nothing about music, and so on and on throughout our major institutions of cultural life. We've lived with this phenomenon long enough now to assess its cultural costs, which have been enormous. If the programs in our art museums have come more and more to resemble the vulgarities of the mass media, if the intellectual quality of a university education has sunk to new levels of mediocrity and ignorance, if a great many other institutions of high culture have similarly settled for mistaken notions of "democratic" change, it is in large part because their governing boards have failed to uphold the standards appropriate to the functions of these institutions. They have failed, in other words, to appoint top executives who know what those standards are and are willing to fight for their advancement.

It speaks well for both Mr. de Montebello and William H. Luers, the outgoing president of the museum, that they have not allowed the worst to happen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We weren't so lucky with Mr. Luer's predecessor as president, however, and other museums have similarly experienced grave problems caused by the policy of divided authority. In a great art museum, there is no substitute for a director—or, if you like, a chief executive officer —who really knows something about art, and it is a measure of the present crisis that something so obvious even needs to be stated. It is nice to know that, at the Met at least, this obvious fact of cultural life has again been given its due.

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Reflections on a cultural revolution: VI

The new sensibility

by Roger Kimball

Everyone who feels bored cries out for change. With this demand I am in complete sympathy, but it is necessary to act in accordance with some settled principle. . . . Nil admirari *[nothing is to be marveled at] is . . . the real philosophy. No moment must be permitted so great a significance that it cannot be forgotten when convenient; each moment ought, however, to have so much significance that it can be recollected at will. . . . From the beginning one should keep the enjoyment under control, never spreading every sail to the wind in any resolve; one ought to devote oneself to pleasure with a certain suspicion, a certain wariness, if one desires to give the lie to the proverb which says that no one can eat his cake and have it too.*
—Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*

Like all great aesthetes, Barthes was an expert at having it both ways.
—Susan Sontag, *"On Roland Barthes"*

In an earlier installment of these reflections, we noted that America's cultural revolution, despite the insurrectionary rhetoric that accompanied it, differed in important ways from political revolutions as traditionally understood. To be sure, the endless demonstrations, sit-ins, rallies, petitions, marches, and "non-negotiable demands" that were such a prominent feature of the 1960s and 1970s had myriad political ramifications. Everything that has come under the Orwellian rubric of "affirmative action" is a case in point. Nevertheless, the result of the counterculture's political activism was not to overthrow a government but to transform morals—using "morals" broadly, as Matthew Arnold did in his famous essay on Wordsworth, to encompass "whatever bears upon the question, 'how to live.' "

There are other distinctions to be observed. For if America's cultural revolution must be distinguished on one side from genuine political revolution, so it must be distinguished on another side from a genuine intellectual or artistic revolution. Of course, talk about "innovation," "creativity," and a new "avant-garde" was deafening in the 1960s and 1970s. But looking back on that period—and looking around now at its sordid aftermath—one is left mostly with the embarrassing sensation of hyperactive sterility. What was all the sound and fury about? What did that putative unleashing of "creativity" create? It is as if an entire generation had somehow conspired to infantilize itself, substituting overblown intellectual impersonation for serious cultural endeavor. When one compares it to the last truly important era of artistic and cultural innovation—the era of high modernism, which culminated in the 1920s—one is struck above all by the extent to which the "radical" artistic and intellectual gestures of the counterculture were unwitting repetitions or jejune parodies of ideas that had seemed old before World War II.

Partly, no doubt, what we saw in the Sixties was a venerable case of history

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repeating itself as farce. But if its combination of vacuousness, self-infatuation, and political grandstanding seems mostly preposterous now, that should not lead us to underestimate its destructive effects. America's cultural revolution was not itself an intellectual or artistic revolution; but it nevertheless has had immense consequences for artistic and intellectual life. It is not simply that there has been a disastrous lowering of standards. There has also been a wholesale attack on the very idea of standards: a process of blurring or (more accurately) inversion that has made critical discrimination seem like an antiquarian pursuit. What we have witnessed is a corruption of taste that is at the same time the triumph of a certain species of aestheticizing decadence.

No one has more lovingly delineated, or more perfectly epitomized, the mandarin ambiguities of this situation than Susan Sontag, the critic, novelist, playwright, filmmaker, theatrical director, professional aesthete, and political radical. Sontag burst upon the New York intellectual scene in the mid Sixties with a handful of remarkable essays: "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964) and "On Style" (1965) in *Partisan Review*; "Against Interpretation" (1964) in *Evergreen Review*; "One Culture and the New Sensibility" (1965), an abridged version of which first appeared in *Mademoiselle*; and several essays and reviews in the newly launched *New York Review of Books*. (Sontag contributed a short review of Simone Weil's essays for the *Review*'s inaugural issue in 1963.) Almost overnight, it seemed, these essays electrified intellectual debate and catapulted their author to celebrity.

Not that Sontag's efforts were unanimously praised. Far from it. The critic John Simon, to take just one example, wondered in a sharp letter to *Partisan Review* whether Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" was itself "only a piece of 'camp.'" No, the important thing was the *attentiveness* of the response. Pro or con, Sontag's essays galvanized debate: indeed, they contributed mightily to changing the very climate of intellectual debate. Her demand, at the end of "Against Interpretation," that "in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art"; her praise of camp, the "whole point" of which "is to dethrone the serious"; her encomium to the "new sensibility" of the Sixties, whose acolytes, she observed, "have broken, whether they know it or not, with the Matthew Arnold notion of culture, finding it historically and humanly obsolescent": in these and other such pronouncements Sontag offered not arguments but a mood, a tone, an atmosphere.

Never mind that a lot of it was mere verbiage: it was nevertheless *irresistible* verbiage. It somehow didn't matter, for example, that the whole notion of "an erotics of art" was arrant nonsense. Everyone likes sex, and talking about "erotics" seems so much sexier than talking about "sex"; and of course everyone likes art: how was it that no one had thought of putting them together in this clever way before? Who would bother with something so boring as mere "interpretation"—which, Sontag had suggested, was these days "reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling," "the revenge of the intellect upon art"—when he could have (or pretend to have) an erotics instead?

It was a remarkable performance, all the more so as Sontag was then barely thirty years old. In truth, there had always been something precocious—not to say hasty—about her. Born in New York City in 1933, she had been brought up mostly in Arizona and California (her father died in 1938; Sontag is her stepfather's name). She began skipping grades when she was six. Graduating from high school when she was barely sixteen, Sontag went first to the University of California at Berkeley and then, in the fall of 1949, to the University of Chicago. In December of 1950, when she was seventeen, she met the critic Philip Rieff (author of *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* [1966], among other works), then a twenty-eight-year-old instructor, who was giving a course that Sontag audited. As she was leaving after the first class, Sontag recalled, "He was

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standing at the door and he grabbed my arm and asked my name. I apologized and told him I had only come to audit. 'No, what's your name?' he persisted. 'Will you have lunch with me.'" Married ten days later, they found themselves with a son—who would grow up to be the left-wing writer David Rieff—in 1952 and a divorce in 1958. Meanwhile Sontag, having picked up a bachelor's degree at Chicago after three years, had also spent time studying at Harvard—where she took a master's degree in philosophy—and at Oxford and the Sorbonne. Armed with a battery of French names few people knew about here, she returned to New York in 1959, worked briefly at *Commentary* and elsewhere before taking up, in 1960, a teaching position at Columbia in (*mirabile dictu*) the department of religion.

But all this was prolegomenon. Looking back on it now, it seems obvious that throughout those years Sontag was constructing, burnishing, perfecting—what to call it? A style, partly; a tone, assuredly; but in the end, perhaps, it might be best described as an *altitude*. By the time she began publishing in highbrow journals like *Partisan Review*, Sontag had made herself the mistress of a new brand of cultural hauteur. It was ferociously intellectual without necessarily being intelligent; it deployed, but did not rely upon, arguments. Its invariable direction was *de haut en bas*. "Formal" and "formalist" are among Sontag's favorite words. In her early essays, she never tires of telling us that works of art must be judged for their formal properties, not their "content." If we judge Sontag's own essays in "formal" terms, they may appear as models of chic daring; but judged in terms of content, they are little more than a repository of intellectual clichés—witness the insistence, as if it were something original, on judging art for its formal excellence and not its "message," one of the hoariest of modern half-truths. "The satisfactions of *Paradise Lost*," she writes in "On Style," do not lie in its views on God and man, but in the superior kinds of energy, vitality, expressiveness which are incarnated in the poem." What she doesn't say is that the energy, vitality, and expressiveness of Milton's poem are unintelligible apart from the truths it aspires to articulate. If this were not the case, *Paradise Lost* might just as well be about baked beans as about "justify[ing] the ways of God to man."

It goes without saying that what we are dealing with here is only partly a matter of *intellectual* style. Sontag was creating a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and it had sartorial as well as cerebral leitmotifs. We get a hint of this in the introduction to *Conversations with Susan Sontag*, a collection of interviews published in 1995. The editor of that volume quotes a description of an author's photograph depicting Sontag "in black trousers, black polo-neck and wearing cowboy boots. She is stretched out on a window-sill with a pile of books and papers under her arm. The seriousness is lightened by the faint flicker of pleasure: this is an image which pleases the author. At home, with books, wearing black." It is not said whether this was before or after the publication of *Texas Boots*, David Rieff's celebration of cowboy boots. In any event, it is clear that a less physically attractive woman could never have aspired to be Susan Sontag.

It is hardly surprising that one of Sontag's indisputable contributions has been to the art of pretension—or perhaps it should be called "intellectual impersonation." It is not every day, for example, that a writer, asked when his interest in "the moral" began, will reply as did Sontag that

> I believe that it began when I was three years old. In other aspects, I am not very clear about when I was young, which is a source of strength and a problem at the same time. I remember that I would think much on the things that I think about now before I was ten years old.

It is almost enough to make one join Sontag in her campaign against interpretation.

In one early essay, Sontag described the

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bombastic dramatic events known as "happenings" as "an art of radical juxtaposition." The same can be said of her essays, singly and taken in comparison with one another. What she produces are not essays, really, but verbal collages. *Against Interpretation* (1966), her first collection, contains pieces on Sartre *and* science fiction novels, the literary criticism of the Marxist Georg Lukács *and* a paean to Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, a cult film in which, as Sontag cheerfully puts it, "a couple of women and a much larger number of men, most of them clad in flamboyant thrift-shop women's clothes, frolic about, pose and posture, dance with one another, and enact various scenes of voluptuousness, sexual frenzy, romance, and vampirism," including scenes of masturbation, gang rape, and oral sex. Sontag castigates the "indifference or hostility" of "the mature intellectual and artistic community" to this "small but valuable work" in the tradition of "the cinema of shock." She praises the "extraordinary charge and beauty of [Smith's] images" and—a signature Sontag touch—the film's "exhilarating freedom from moralism." Sontag is very big on that "exhilarating freedom from moralism." Acknowledging that "by ordinary standards"—but not, of course, by hers—*Flaming Creatures* is composed of themes that are "perverse, decadent," she insists that really the film "is about joy and innocence," not least because it is "both too full of pathos and too ingenuous to be prurient."

This sort of thing was catnip to the intellectual establishment of the mid 1960s. Not that any of it was new, exactly. *Nostalgie de la boue* has long been a defining disease of bourgeois intellectuals, and has been effectively peddled by many before the advent of S. Sontag. But few if any writers commanded Sontag's air of perfect knowingness, which managed to combine commendation, indifference, and disdain with breathtaking virtuosity.

In his review of *Under the Sign of Saturn*, a collection of Sontag's essays published in 1980, John Simon noted that "nothing succeeds better than highbrow endorsement of lowbrow tastes." Sontag's great trick was not merely to endorse lowbrow tastes, but to create the illusion that for the truly sophisticated all intellectual, artistic, and moral distinctions of merit were otiose, dispensable, *de trop*. This is one reason that she championed the camp sensibility. "Camp," she observed, "is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of 'style' over 'content,' 'aesthetics' over 'morality,' of irony over tragedy." Camp, she went on to say, "is a solvent of morality," concluding with one of her famous paradoxes: "The ultimate Camp statement: it's good *because* it's awful." (She immediately adds: "of course, one can't always say that. Only under certain conditions"—thus letting you know that not just anyone is allowed to indulge in contradiction and win praise for it.)

One of Sontag's characteristic productions was "The Pornographic Imagination" (1967), which appears in *Styles of Radical Will* (1969), her second collection. In essence, it is a defense of pornography, not, of course, as something merely salacious—that would grant too much recognition of its "content"—but for its "formal" resources as a means of transcendence. It is hardly news that sexual ecstasy has often poached on religious rhetoric and vice versa; nor is it news that pornography often employs religious metaphors. That is part of its perversity. But Sontag decides to take pornography seriously as a solution to the spiritual desolations of modern secular culture. Writing about Pauline Réage's pornographic *Story of O*, she solemnly tells us that

> O is an adept; whatever the cost in pain and fear, she is grateful for the opportunity to be initiated into a mystery. That mystery is the loss of self. O learns, she suffers, she changes. Step by step she becomes more what she is, a process identical with the emptying out of herself. In the vision of the world presented by *The Story of O*, the highest good is the transcendence of personality.

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Which is about as accurate as saying that the Marquis de Sade's books are essentially about exercise.

One of Sontag's great gifts has been her ability to enlist her politics in the service of her aestheticism. For her, it is the work of a moment to move from admiring pornography—or at least "the pornographic imagination"—to castigating

> the traumatic failure of capitalist society to provide authentic outlets for the perennial human flair for high-temperature visionary obsession, to satisfy the appetite for exalted self-transcending modes of concentration and seriousness. The need of human beings to transcend "the person" is no less profound than the need to be a person, an individual.

"The Pornographic Imagination," like most of Sontag's essays, is full of powerful phrases, seductive insights, and extraordinary balderdash. Sontag dilates on pornography's "peculiar access to some truth." What she doesn't say is that *The Story of O* (for example) presents not an instance of mystical fulfillment but a graphic depiction of human degradation. Only someone who had allowed "form" to triumph over "content" could have ignored this. In a way, "The Pornographic Imagination" is itself the perfect camp gesture: for if camp aims to "dethrone the serious" it is also, as Sontag points out, "deadly serious" about the demotic and the trivial. Sontag is a master at both ploys. Having immersed herself in the rhetoric of traditional humanistic learning, she is expert at using it against itself. This of course is a large part of what has made her writing so successful among would-be "avant-garde" intellectuals: playing with the empty forms of traditional moral and aesthetic thought, she is able to appear simultaneously unsettling and edifying, daringly "beyond good and evil" and yet passionately *engagé*.

"The Pornographic Imagination" also exhibits the seductive Sontag hauteur in full flower. After telling us that pornography can be an exciting version of personal transcendence, she immediately remarks that "not everyone is in the same condition as knowers or potential knowers. Perhaps most people don't need 'a wider scale of experience.' It may be that, without subtle and extensive psychic preparation, any widening of experience and consciousness is destructive for most people." Not for you and me, Dear Reader: we are among the elect. We deserve that "wider scale of experience"; but as for the rest, as for "most people," well. . . .

It doesn't always work. As a writer, Sontag is essentially a coiner of epigrams. At their best they are witty, well phrased, provocative. A few are even true: "Nietzsche was a histrionic thinker but not a lover of the histrionic." But Sontag's striving for effect (unlike Nietzsche, she *is* a lover of the histrionic) often leads her into muddle. In "One Culture and the New Sensibility," for example, she enthusiastically reasons that "if art is understood as a form of discipline of the feelings and a programming of sensations, then the feeling (or sensation) given off by a Rauschenberg painting might be like that of a song by the Supremes." But of course the idea that art is a "programming of the sensations" (a phrase, alas, of which Sontag is particularly fond) is wrong, incoherent, or both, as is the idea that feelings or sensations might be "given off" by any song or painting, even one by Rauschenberg (odors, yes; sensations, no). As often happens, her passion for synesthesia and effacing boundaries leads her into nonsense.

Charity dictates that we pass lightly over Sontag's fiction and drama. Most of it reminds one of Woody Allen's parody of Kafka. "Should I marry K.? Only if she tells me the other letters of her name"—that sort of thing. Here's a sample from *I, etcetera* (a book whose title might be reused for Sontag's collected works): "Dearest M. I cannot telephone. I am six years old. My grief falls like snowflakes on the warm soil of your indifference. You are inhaling your own pain." Readers looking for the comic side of Sontag's *oeuvre* will want to dip into her fiction: *The Benefactor* (1963) and *Death Kit* (1967)

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are particularly fine, provided they are read as parodies of intellectual solemnity. In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard advised the aspiring aesthete to look for "a very different kind of enjoyment from that which the author has been so kind as to plan for you." It is advice that is particularly relevant when approaching Sontag's "creative writing."

If one wanted to sum up Sontag's allure in a single phrase, it would be difficult to do better than Tom Wolfe's "radical chic." In her manner, her opinions, her politics, Sontag has always been a walking inventory of radical chic attitudes. Writing about Camus's notebooks in 1963, she naturally patronizes him as having been "acclaimed beyond his purely literary merits," assuring us that, unlike Sartre (but like George Orwell), he was not "a thinker of importance." In 1963, Jean-Paul Sartre was still an Approved Radical Figure, whose Communist sympathies and virulent anti-Americanism made him beloved of American intellectuals. Camus, who had had the temerity to criticize Communism, was distinctly not-ARF and had to be taken down a peg or two.

And then there were Sontag's own political activities. Cuba and North Vietnam in 1968, China in 1973, Sarajevo in 1993 (where she went to direct a production of *Waiting for Godot*—surely the consummate radical chic gesture of all time). Few people have managed to combine naïve idealization of foreign tyranny with violent hatred of their own country to such deplorable effect. Consider her essay "Some Thoughts on the Right Way (for us) to Love the Cuban Revolution," which appeared in *Ramparts* magazine in April 1969. She begins with some ritualistic denunciations of American culture as "inorganic, dead, coercive, authoritarian." "America is a cancerous society with a runaway rate of productivity that inundates the country with increasingly unnecessary commodities, services, gadgets, images, information." One of the few spots of light, Sontag tells us, is Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, which teaches that "America's psychic survival entails her transformation through a political revolution." (It also teaches that, for blacks, rape can be a noble "insurrectionary act," a "defying and trampling on the white man's laws," but Sontag doesn't bother with that detail.)

According to her, "the power structure derives its credibility, its legitimacy, its energies from the dehumanization of the individuals who operate it. The people staffing IBM and General Motors, and the Pentagon, and United Fruit are the living dead." Since the counterculture is not strong enough to overthrow IBM, the Pentagon, etc., it must opt for subversion. "Rock, grass, better orgasms, freaky clothes, grooving on nature—really grooving on anything—unfits, maladapts a person for the American way of life." And here is where the Cubans come in: they come by this "new sensibility" naturally, possessing as they do a "southern spontaneity which we feel our own too white, death-ridden culture denies us. . . . The Cubans know a lot about spontaneity, gaiety, sensuality and freaking out. They are not linear, desiccated creatures of print culture."

Indeed not: supine, desiccated creatures of a Communist tyranny would be more like it, though patronizing honky talk about "southern spontaneity" doubtless made things seem much better when this was written. In the great contest for writing the most fatuous line of political drivel, Sontag is always a contender. This essay contains at least two gems: after ten years, she writes, "the Cuban revolution is astonishingly free of repression and bureaucratization," and, even better perhaps, is this passing remark delivered in parentheses: "No Cuban writer has been or is in jail, or is failing to get his work published." Readers wishing to make a reality check should consult Paul Hollander's classic study *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society* (fourth edition, 1998), which cites Sontag's claim and then lists, in two or three pages, some of the many writers and artists who have been jailed, tortured, or executed by Castro's spontaneous gaiety.

Sontag concocted a similar fairy tale

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when she went to Vietnam in 1968 courtesy of the North Vietnamese government. Her long essay "Trip to Hanoi" (1968) is another classic in the literature of political mendacity. Connoisseurs of the genre will especially savor Sontag's observation that the real problem for the North Vietnamese is that they "aren't good enough haters." Their fondness for Americans, she explains, keeps getting in the way of the war effort. "They genuinely care about the welfare of the hundreds of captured American pilots and give them bigger rations than the Vietnamese population gets, 'because they're bigger than we are,' as a Vietnamese army officer told me." Sontag acknowledges that her account tended somewhat to idealize North Vietnam; but that was only because it was a country that "in many respects, *deserves* to be idealized."

Unlike any country in Western Europe, and above all unlike the United States. In "What's Happening in America (1966)," Sontag tells readers that what America "deserves" is to have its wealth "taken away" by the Third World. In one particularly notorious passage, she writes that "the truth is that Mozart, Pascal, Boolean algebra, Shakespeare, parliamentary government, baroque churches, Newton, the emancipation of women, Kant, Marx, and Balanchine ballets don't redeem what this particular civilization has wrought upon the world. The white race *is* the cancer of human history." After a bout with cancer in the 1970s, Sontag emended that last observation because on reflection she had come to realize that it was unfair—to cancer.

What can one say? Sontag excoriates the American economy for its "runaway rate of productivity." But she has had no scruples about enjoying the fruits of that productivity: a Rockefeller Foundation grant in 1964, a Merrill Foundation grant in 1965, a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in 1966, etc., etc., culminating in 1990 with a MacArthur Foundation "genius" award.

But it is not simply in such mundane terms that Sontag wants to have it both ways. Inveterate aestheticism entails intractable intellectual and moral frivolity. Sontag went on to blast the Castro regime for its brutal treatment of certain approved writers, but her condemnation meant little more than her initial enthusiasm. It was, as she might put it, merely "formal": the content didn't count. It was the same with her famous announcement at a left-wing symposium in 1982 that "Communism *is* fascism." How piquant that Susan Sontag should utter this elementary truth! In her essay "On Style," Sontag had assured her readers that Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi films "transcend the categories of propaganda or even reportage": the content of the films—i.e., their endorsement of Nazi ideology—has come "to play a purely formal role." Ten years later, in an essay called "Fascinating Fascism" (1974) she says the opposite: that the "very conception" of *Triumph of the Will* "negates the possibility of the filmmaker's having an aesthetic conception independent of propaganda." Taxed by an interviewer with the contradiction, Sontag replies that "both statements illustrate the richness of the form-content distinction, as long as one is careful always to use it against itself." "Rich" is indeed the *mot juste*. In her book *On Photography* (1977), Sontag says that photography transforms people into "tourists of reality." It is a neat phrase: vivid, arresting, overstated. But as she has shown over and over, Sontag herself is just such a tourist. One day she embraces camp, the next day she warns about the "perils of over-generalizing the aesthetic view of life." As Hilton Kramer observed, "it is not that Sontag was ever prepared to abandon her stand on aestheticism and all its implications. It was only that she did not want it to cost her anything." Sontag once noted that "the relation between boredom and Camp taste cannot be overestimated." One suspects that boredom underlies a good deal of her unhappy radicalism. Discontented with "the Matthew Arnold notion of culture," she abandoned the question of "how to live" and became instead a prophet of the new sensibility of aesthetic nihilism.

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Rebecca West & the FBI

by Carl Rollyson

On October 19, 1992, I wrote to the Federal Bureau of Investigation requesting under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to see Rebecca West's file. I had made a similar request for Lillian Hellman's file, and after several months—with help from my congressman—I received hundreds of pages of reports on Hellman's activities.[1] She had belonged to several Communist Front organizations. She had been involved in labor union drives in California. She was an outspoken leftist and was often called a Stalinist. Most dramatically, she had had an affair with John Melby, a foreign service officer she had met in the U.S. embassy in Moscow. Even after names had been blacked out, the file was a fund of information. It contained accounts from informants and interviews with Hellman's friends and associates. This was raw data—though the word *data* is misleading, since it implies factual material, and FBI files are more like gossip sheets that have to be stringently checked. Errors abound, not merely about a subject's political opinions and affiliations, but also about the basics of his or her life. Unlike *The New Yorker*, the FBI does not employ fact checkers for its files. Nevertheless, these files help to pin down dates, episodes, and scenes in a subject's life. No biographer should be without the FBI dossier of his or her subject—if such a file exists.

I was sure there was a file on Rebecca West (1892–1983), although I was also certain it would look nothing like Lillian Hellman's. Although West often described herself as a socialist—certainly as late as the end of World War II she was voting Labor—she had never been a Communist or a fellow traveler. Even as the revolution was triumphing in Russia in 1917, West voiced skepticism about the Bolsheviks. She made a curious comment about them, one that sounds frivolous. She said they talked too much.

In fact, she had heard them talking in her home, where her conservative father often brought revolutionists (as they were sometimes called then) for debates. He had a fondness for them because he had been educated by two Frenchmen who had been active in the Commune of 1871. He rejected their politics but not the dialectical habit of mind. His precocious and curious daughter, then between the ages of five and eight in 1898–1901, observed these big talkers and drew conclusions about Bolshevism that

1 FOIA requests often take a long time to process. Federal agencies have been slow to comply with the law—partly because it is time-consuming to retrieve files, black out names (for so-called national security reasons), and then photocopy the file contents. I was in a hurry when doing my Hellman biography, having been given only fifteen months to complete the book by my publisher, St. Martin's Press. And I had a feisty Detroit congressman, George Crockett, known for his fearless attacks on government secrecy.

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were confirmed as she matured. Her final word on the revolutionists can be found in her great novel, *The Birds Fall Down* (1966). The revolutionists talk and talk, and what they reveal is a monstrous inhumanity, a dedication to the idea of revolution with a total disregard for the very people they claim to be liberating. Of course, the ancien régime fares no better in this novel. Indeed, the czarist party shares with the Bolsheviks a loquacity that is orgiastic, frenzied, and self-indulgent, for West believed that Bolshevism would use the same autocratic methods as the old guard.[2] The revolutionists would simply build on the czarist bureaucracy and secret police, and the cult of the czar would be replaced by the cult of the Bolshevik leader. This is why West makes her novel's main character a double agent, serving both the revolutionists and the reactionaries.

West regarded the Russian Revolution as a colossal mistake. But when President Wilson and others attempted to quash the Bolshevik advance—even sending troops to help the Whites in Russia—West objected. Each nation had a right to work out its own destiny, she wrote in a preface to Emma Goldman's book *My Disillusionment in Russia* (1924). Rebecca West was a fervent anti-Communist, but she was no redbaiter. Indeed, she deplored the deportation of Goldman from the United States, and West praised Goldman for speaking out against the Palmer raids which rounded up Reds and violated their civil liberties.[3] When Goldman came to England in 1924 to denounce Bolshevik tyranny and to solicit aid from the British Left for her anti-Bolshevik campaign, West staunchly supported her even as figures such as Bertrand Russell and H. G. Wells refused to sanction Goldman's all-out attack on the Soviet Union. West had nothing but scorn for liberals and other leftists who would not criticize the Soviet Union because the British Conservative Party and reactionary elements also attacked what West insisted was not a union of soviet socialist republics, but in fact simply Soviet Russia. She predicted that the British Labor Party and the cause of socialism would be doomed if the British Left blinked at Soviet tyranny. When she was not attacked for being merely a fanatical anti-Communist, she was ignored. Of course, West was correct, and she was—as far as I know—the first person in the West to get it right while maintaining a leftist orientation.

West believed that the future—however difficult—belonged to republican governments. When Franco attacked the Spanish republic, she supported the republic even though that meant supporting Communists, who were organizing much of the resistance to fascism. She gave money to Ralph Bates, one of her colleagues at the periodical *Time and Tide,* so that he could speak on behalf of the Spanish republic in the United States. West did not attach her name to the lists of Communist Front organizations and members that agitated on behalf of the Spanish republic, but she included herself in a pamphlet filled with writers' statements backing the republic.

By the beginning of World War II, West's strong anti-Communism placed her in a precarious position among her leftist friends, a fact that can easily be ascertained from the epilogue to her masterpiece, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941). Her main charge against the Left is that it had been more concerned with the moral purity of its principles than with the struggle to gain political power. Rather than dealing with the compromises that any ruling majority has to make, the Left—particularly the Labor

2 The phrase "orgiastic loquacity" appears in an article West wrote for the London *Daily News*, August 9, 1917, which expresses her doubts about the Bolsheviks. The article is reprinted in *The Young Rebecca*, edited by Jane Marcus (Indiana University Press, 1982).

3 Alexander Mitchell Palmer (1872–1936) was the U.S. attorney general from 1919 to 1921. At his direction, three thousand allegedly subversive aliens were arrested for deportation. Most were eventually released, with only about two hundred people actually being deported.

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Party—had preferred its role as a virtuous minority. Small wonder, then, that reactionary and fascist forces had filled the power vacuum. She had also lost a good deal of faith in the socialist promise, though it would take the antediluvian attitudes of the labor unions in the 1950s, and her disgust with the hysteria over McCarthyism, to smother her last tender feelings toward the Left.

West got into a good deal of trouble with a series of articles for the London *Sunday Times* in March 1953 (reprinted in *U.S. News and World Report*) for advancing a position that was far more concerned about Communist infiltration of Western governments and with the tyrannical policies of Communist regimes than with the relatively petty annoyance of Communist witch-hunts. As she made clear in a series of biographical articles on Stalin in the London *Evening Standard*, Communism was not a political ideology; it was a criminal conspiracy that deserved to be investigated and rooted out of Western democracies.

So why should I think that Rebecca West had an FBI file? If there ever was a figure above suspicion as a subversive, it was certainly Rebecca West. But dossiers were assembled not just on Communists and fellow travelers. The FBI investigated all sorts of people in the public eye. More importantly, West had an impressive record of contacts with government agencies and offices. She could well have been an informant for the FBI or other agencies such as the CIA. She knew the CIA's first director, Allen Dulles, quite well. Her husband, Henry Andrews, knew Dulles from the 1920s and 1930s, when Dulles worked on Wall Street. West talked politics with Dulles; they met socially. They corresponded. During the 1930s, West wrote a series of articles on the New Deal and got to know Attorney General Francis Biddle—later one of the judges at the Nuremberg trials, when the two had an affair.

Biddle told her that he regretted the shoddy hiring practices during the Roosevelt years; there had been a lot of logrolling—Communists hiring fellow Communists. Biddle told her things that he would never say publicly—things that no Democrat felt comfortable talking about, since the Republicans would surely use the open expression of such regrets to partisan advantage. Discussion of the extent of Communist infiltration of the New Deal was always skewed because, once again, liberals who knew about the infiltration did not want to abet the reactionaries who would use this knowledge to undermine New Deal policies. Instead, Truman initiated his own internal security programs that demanded such things as loyalty oaths.

In England, West had extraordinary contacts with the British Foreign Office. Her travels in Yugoslavia had made her a valuable source for the British government, and her husband's contacts in Germany and in Eastern Europe also made him a source of information about the German aircraft industry and about business enterprises in Nazi-occupied lands. Andrews had also been instrumental in spiriting many Jews out of Nazi Germany and had extensive contacts in the underground. West and Andrews knew the important figures in the London governments-in-exile during the war. The couple heard all the gossip about the intrigues involving Tito and the jostling for position in postwar Europe.

Right after the war, West relied on her friendship with Theobald Mathew, who had been her attorney and advisor for years and was then director of public prosecutions, to procure material for her coverage of the treason trials which resulted in her two great books of reportage, *The Meaning of Treason* (1948) and *A Train of Powder* (1955). West loved law cases and government documents. Unlike many intellectuals, she understood modern administration and bureaucracy. She had a feel for what it was like to govern—not just a penchant for criticizing the governors. See, for example, her extraordinary book *The Court and the Castle* (1957) in which she reveals her exquisite literary and political perceptions. She un-

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derstands Kafka, for example, not only as a writer, but also as an official who worked for the Hapsburg bureaucracy.

So I was prepared to read a most unusual FBI file—one that would reveal a writer who had an inside knowledge of how modern governments dealt with security matters. Her profile would be nothing like those of most intellectuals who sign petitions and lend their names to causes out of a kind of sentimental leftism, which still goes unexamined. I also knew something else. West had a direct pipeline into the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). She had an old American friend, Doris Stevens, whom West had first met in the 1920s when they shared a fervent devotion to feminism. Stevens later worked for the New Deal, was fired, and then soured on the Roosevelts, angry that they had been co-opted by the Communists who had infiltrated the New Deal bureaucracy.

Stevens fed West information from HUAC files. She even interviewed Elizabeth Bentley, the so-called "Red Spy Queen," whom many on the Left ridiculed but whom Stevens and West believed. (Much of what seemed farfetched in Bentley's HUAC testimony has been corroborated in recent years). What is so impressive about West is that she did not merely read about Bentley but did her own investigative work. And she did not just read about HUAC, she looked at the way HUAC gathered its data—a far more scrupulous process than anyone could imagine from watching the buffoonery of congressmen riding the anti-Communist bandwagon for self-serving purposes. HUAC made a poor impression in the media, but it had investigators doing serious research. It is shameful, of course, that HUAC often made a hash of that research—a point West conceded.

I made my request to the FBI in the autumn of 1992. I also wrote to other security agencies, such as the CIA and the National Security Agency (NSA). I expected to wait up to a year for information. I bided my time because I had West's own extensive files and could track her political involvements through her correspondence and through the papers of her friends and associates. But I was stunned to learn that each agency claimed that it had nothing on West in its files. I surmised that the material had been destroyed sometime earlier or that an inadequate search had been made.

The FBI acknowledged my FOIA request on November 12, 1992, and I never heard from the agency again—that is until August 3, 1997—nearly two years after I had completed my biography of West. Her file arrived at my Baruch College office. Names had been blacked out and pages were missing, probably for any of the following reasons: an executive order had established that this material be kept secret; revealing certain material would interfere with enforcement proceedings; disclosing the contents would invade privacy; confidential sources would be disclosed; techniques and procedures of law enforcement agencies would be revealed and thus risk circumvention of the law; the life or physical safety of individuals might be endangered.

Even with these exemptions, I got sixteen pages—a small file but a revealing one, nevertheless, about both Rebecca West and the FBI. The first page is a memorandum (August 22, 1955) from Mr. M. A. Jones to Mr. Nichols providing a capsule biography of the subject taken—as it often is in FBI files—from a standard reference book that contains significant errors. In this case, the mistake is the statement that West was born in Scotland. In fact, she was born in London, although she received much of her education in Edinburgh. The third sentence identifies her as an anti-Communist. The next sentence (bingo!) reports that she has furnished information to an FBI liaison representative (name blacked out) in England "on a number of occasions." It is noted that she requested from the FBI information on the Rosenberg and Fuchs spy cases, about which she later wrote articles. (In fact, as the FBI file later reveals, in December 1952, West wrote directly to J. Edgar Hoover about the Rosenbergs, but she was not

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given information because the case was then being appealed.) Mr. Jones cites a memorandum of May 1953 that his colleague Mr. Jones wrote to J. Edgar Hoover's right-hand man, Clyde Tolson, observing that West had written articles defending "McCarthyism." These were the *U.S. News & World Report* articles that got West into trouble with American liberals. She would have vehemently denied that she was defending McCarthyism; rather, her articles treated him as a sideshow—not as a menace to the Republic.

Mr. Jones reports that West has stated she knows John Foster Dulles "very well." I never found any support for that claim—if she made it. He also refers to Mr. Nichols's memo from 1951 about West's "vociferous" writing about traitors. Her travels in Yugoslavia, her reports on the Nuremberg trials, and her interest in the Hiss case are all duly noted in this "synopsis" Mr. Jones provides for Mr. Nichols. The FBI had not only followed West's travels and her writing, it took note of her contacts with Europeans who "came to her with information." To Clyde Tolson, she had conveyed (whether in person, in writing, or indirectly is not clear because the memo is blacked out at this point) the names of important Soviet agents in America. The FBI investigated her source, a TASS representative, but Mr. Jones does not comment on the accuracy of her statement. He also acknowledges her article, "Opera in Greenville," concerning a lynching in Greenville, South Carolina, which contained, he says, "an unfavorable reference to the Bureau." (She had criticized the FBI's possibly "illegitimate methods" of obtaining statements from witnesses.)

Much of the material in West's dossier is repetitive—a characteristic of many FBI files. Subsequent pages fill in details about her education and publication history. The FBI took keen interest in how she phrased her anti-Communist position. For instance, it remarked that one of her *Sunday Times* articles concluded that the printed record of Congressional investigations of Communism "shows no more inquisitiveness at work . . . than the situation would have provoked in any society not manifestly insane." She had also called the word "witch-hunting" the "careless repetition of an impudent piece of Communist propaganda." Although such statements outraged many liberals, the FBI file points out that the *U.S. News & World Report* reprint of the *Sunday Times* articles had provoked a phenomenal reaction: "All issues of the magazine had been sold out and . . . the magazine's mail had been unprecedented—most letters upholding West's view."

Mr. Jones charted the trajectory of West's involvement in Yugoslavia and how she had been accused of allying herself with the country's right-wing parties and with a banker husband who had financial interests in Eastern Europe. West denied these allegations, Mr. Jones points out. Her husband had no property or investments in Yugoslavia or in businesses dealing with that country, and she was not a reactionary—although she added in a preface to David Martin's book, *Ally Betrayed* (an account of how the West had abandoned General Mihailović for Marshal Tito):

> I am a socialist. But I have to admit that in the last few years the left wing has shown itself just about as good a custodian of the sacred principles of Liberty, Fraternity, and Equality, as the watchdog who was found holding a lamp in his mouth for the burglar who was cracking the safe.

This criticism, voiced in 1947, would be confirmed for West straightaway in the credulous position that the Left adopted in the Hiss-Chambers case. She would call it the Dreyfus case in reverse: whereas Dreyfus had been the victim of those who immediately presumed him guilty, Hiss became the darling of liberals who automatically assumed and indeed demanded that Hiss be declared innocent. Mr. Jones comments that the media was beginning to slot West into a reactionary niche. He quotes a *New York Times* article (January 18, 1948) which observes that West adored Yugoslavia

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"and its vivid inhabitants from what one may call the right-wing side of the fence politically."

In October 1950, the FBI's Baltimore office had further confirmation of West's impressive sources on the subject of Communist infiltration of Western governments. Whittaker Chambers, in an interview with the FBI, revealed that he had been told (the name of his informant is blacked out) that before the Hiss case broke in America, a young Czech woman had told West that Hiss was a Russian spy. The FBI then interviewed the woman, who corroborated what she had told West and what Chambers had passed on to the FBI. Apparently West had not gone to the FBI or to British security, concluding after a discussion with her husband that "she had no business getting involved in the controversy," Mr. Jones reports. The FBI, working through its legal attaché in London, took steps to set up an interview with West. Later pages in her file reveal that on August 17, 1951, she provided the FBI with substantial background information on Communist activities.

The London interview was evidently a doozy. The legal attaché had been prepped for the interview with the cautionary observation that West was "irritable and suspicious" but also "extremely conscientious, intelligent, sincere and needing to be treated with patience and candor." West revealed that a TASS representative had approached her while she was covering the Progressive Party presidential convention in Philadelphia in 1948. She not only relayed what he said but added much more, though how valuable it was to the FBI is uncertain, since some of it was judged "largely nonspecific." But that phrase refers to material or to persons who are blacked out. West may have been a little cagey, for her file notes:

> She advised she preferred furnishing the information to American authorities since she had little confidence in British Intelligence and the Director of Public Prosecutions in London. She previously had furnished the Public Prosecutor information concerning Communists in Government, but no action had been taken.

West was interviewed again in September 1951 and on other occasions, Mr. Jones reports.

How reliable was West's information? The FBI considered the question carefully. She was unsure about details. For example, she could give only a phonetic spelling for the TASS representative she had interviewed. It was hard getting a complete picture from her. Rebecca West was one of the great talkers of the Western world, but on the subject of Communism she managed to bore even the FBI. Her remarks are characterized as "rather tedious." It is also eyebrow-raising for a member of the Bureau to call her "very sensitive and imaginative and certainly fanatic on the subject of Communism." The ultimate conclusion, however, was that "she undoubtedly had seen a person (Tass representative) who in all probability had furnished her information concerning Soviet spies and Communists."

West's confidence in the FBI—as opposed to the British security services—never wavered. For example, she alerted the FBI that in February 1953 she had seen the galleys of William Allen Jowitt's book *The Strange Case of Alger Hiss* and that the book took an unfavorable attitude toward the FBI. She was so incensed after a dinner with Charlie Chaplin, in which he brazenly broadcast his Communist views, that she had contacted the Bureau, calling Chaplin "crazy." He was an ex-lover, whom she had seen in Rome while trying to write a screenplay for Roberto Rossellini, whom she also found to be infected with Communist enthusiasm. A blacked-out section covering events during this period has an asterisk after it with the comment that at least some of West's allegations could not be substantiated.

It is impossible to tell, in the end, how good an informant Rebecca West made. At least three pages of her file have been re-

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moved. What is striking is that she apparently never mentioned any of her liberal American friends—anyone who might fall under the FBI's suspicion. She often had arguments with American liberals who thought she had a blind spot about McCarthyism, and she got angry at people like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who tried to get her to reconsider her view that McCarthy had done no significant damage to American institutions or to the political climate.[4]

West, in truth, was far more concerned with how the FBI regarded her than about the criticism of liberals. In November 1953, for example, she wrote a letter to the Bureau explaining that her article on the dangers of radioactivity should not be taken as some kind of "anti-H-bomb or unilateral disarmament campaign." What the Bureau called her active imagination is revealed in this letter (which is part of her FBI file) in which she fears that "some form of Intelligence might be wrinkling its brows" over her article. Near the end of her file is her acknowledgement of J. Edgar Hoover's letter congratulating her on the honor of having been named Dame of the British Empire.

Seeing her letter gave me a shock—not so much for what it says (the letter is in character), but because Hoover's letter is not in West's papers, and I am sure she treasured it. Her words to Hoover sound an entirely conservative note, but then on March 7, 1959—when she wrote the letter—she did believe that the West was engaged in an apocalyptic struggle with Communism. She had come to believe that without law there can be no order or liberty. "It was most kind of you to send me your congratulations on my Damehood or Dameship, I haven't myself yet grasped what it should be called," West wrote Hoover. "I am proud of my honour, and proud too that the FBI should have sent me their good wishes. Long may they live to establish law and order!"

J. Edgar Hoover has become, of course, the great bugbear of American liberals, and West's letter will no doubt make the Left wince. She could be more fanatical on the subject of anti-Communism than the FBI—but then she thought that her side (the Left) had let her down, and she was badly in need of allies and of acknowledgement, both of which the FBI gave her. Her file confirms a side of West that my biography of her also shows: she felt (I think justifiably) isolated. Her outspoken anti-Communism got her tagged not only as a conservative or a reactionary; it also hurt her in the literary world, where her magnificent grasp of political reality and of political institutions is still shunned.

West reached a turning point, I believe, when Stalin made his pact with Hitler. She noted that many of the founders of the Bolshevik Party were Jewish—not to mention Karl Marx himself. That Stalin could strike a deal with the man responsible for the Holocaust (and she knew about the concentration camps long before Western governments acknowledged their existence) proved that Soviet Russia was nothing more than a criminal regime. She was revolted at the way so much of the Left ignored Stalin's culpability. I think it is her loathing for this tyranny that overrode any consideration she might otherwise have given to the evils of McCarthyism.

With evils as massive as Communism and fascism, West put no stock in leftist sentiments as a way to counteract tyranny. Institutions like the FBI were essential. In a little-known, brief essay, she explained how her political attitudes had evolved. She had grown up in a world that prized rebellion, and she had been a rebel. She supposed that human beings were naturally good and that the law was a cumbersome instrument that dealt harshly with people. Law would lose its sway when the revolution brought an end to poverty and evil. Two wars, the con-

4 For more information on West's attitude toward McCarthyism and American liberals, see my *Rebecca West: A Life* (Scribner, 1996) and "Rebecca West and the God That Failed," *Wilson Quarterly* (Summer 1996).

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centration camps, and totalitarian government convinced her that the good in people was not merely a quality to be brought out. It had to be created by an effort of love and a submission to the "Rule of Law."

West's letter to Hoover acknowledges his authority. Too often, in her view, dissent had turned into an attack on the idea of authority itself. Her letter is, if you will, a kind of submission. West was not surrendering her freedom to criticize Hoover and government institutions, but she was recognizing his rightful role in upholding the law. At the same time, she recognized not merely the role of the dissenter but of the traitor, arguing in *The Meaning of Treason* that it was good for individuals to have a drop of treason in their blood. Society did not change, and it could not improve, without challenges to authority.

The FBI welcomed and yet was understandably wary of Rebecca West's contributions to its anti-Communist investigations. She had an incandescent mind. Her niece has said that if she ever came back it would be as a firework. There is a memo from an FBI official to Hoover, forwarding that letter West wrote expressing her concern that her article on the hydrogen bomb and the dangers of radioactivity would be taken the wrong way by the FBI. The memo notes that "apparently Miss West envisions some chain reaction to her article among intelligence circles. . . ." The official's metaphor of the chain reaction is appropriate. West thought of herself as producing fissionable material, nuclear reactions that could set off political explosions. I sympathize with those FBI agents attempting to track her dialectical arguments. As her recently released FBI file suggests, the repercussions of Rebecca West's protean imagination have yet to be investigated.

Appendix

The Rebecca West–Doris Stevens file, 1947–1959

The correspondence between Rebecca West and Doris Stevens reveals the post–World War II climate in which West's anti-Communism flourished. She often felt besieged, and her feelings of persecution propelled her toward the FBI. The letters also reveal the way she believed that Communists and fellow travelers worked to undermine and to discredit the work of anti-Communists, and her determination to fight back.—C.R.

October 26, 1947: I was falsely charged with slandering one of the Labour M.P.'s. . . . They thought they had got enough on me to shut me up, then started a campaign against me in the New Statesman. The second stage of the campaign was a letter from an American living in London called Robert Solo—accusing me of anti-Semitism. Now, I have a recollection of seeing his name in connection with the New Masses or some other Communist paper. Can you help me on this?

August 29, 1948: [Don Hollenbeck, in *CBS Looks at the Press*] blasted me in an incredible script—concentrating on the fact that I was old, fat, and ugly, and owned Jersey cows—on my Wallace Convention articles. Then, a fortnight later, came back to it. Then his whim was to piece together my Evening Standard articles in such a way that he could frame a piece together informing the United States that I had written articles for England which were anti-American and anti-Negro. . . . Now, the significant thing about this is that the London Daily Worker had started to blast me as anti-Negro; and my leak in the Communist camp tells me that the London Daily Worker was busily

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working on my material. . . . Can we put the heat on him [Hollenbeck]?

December 29, 1948: I imagine that the Hiss and Chambers case as it develops gives you something that you feel worth while—at least people are having their eyes open. . . . There is a complete misapprehension as to what has happened, and I have found it uphill work convincing people there is something which is going on. . . .

June 7, 1950: Thank you for that armful of reports from the Un-American Activities Committee.

August 21, 1950, DS to RW: Ben Mandel of the Un-Am.Actc.Cttee staff wrote me he had "solved the difficulty of putting me on the list for an extra copy of everything" which I could send to you.

October 25, 1950, DS to RW: My memo to you [about Elizabeth Bentley] is based on notes taken down from her miles of talk, boiled down and read back to her and approved by her. . . .

January 14, 1951: Did I write you about the Elizabeth B stuff? Because it was superb. . . . I have done a review of Alistair Cooke's iniquitous book on the Hiss case in Time & Tide (which I enclose) and have written a much longer review for the University of Chicago Law Review. Dick Crossman (the Labour M.P.) is trying to fix up a dialogue on it between us on the radio, but you know how strong Communist influence is there. I have tried to do what I can for the Toledano & Lasky book, which has had a poor show. . . . I have used those Committee reports well . . . I am not mentioning Elizabeth B.'s book in my chapter because her book will be out long before mine, but I will boost her book good and hard, and hope to find an opportunity for doing so quite soon.

April 26, 1951: I believe Chambers—tho' I don't like or trust him—why wasn't Hiss sentenced for espionage instead of perjury—why was Chambers protecting him and others involved, in the State Department. . . . I couldn't help thinking that Chambers and others were in love with Hiss and C was afraid that the story would come out—Jan says I have a low mind—well, I have, so what?

May 25, 1951: I am writing six articles of a popular kind for Everybody Weekly—the Canadian Spy Ring, the Hiss case, the Atom Scientists, the Rosenbergs—not because I want to, I can ill spare the time, but nobody else is telling the story.

June 9, 1951: About the F.O. men: Burgess, the Far Eastern boy, came into my life when I was fighting a lone hand for Mihailovitch during the war. A MOST SUSPICIOUS CHARACTER in the F.O. introduced himself to Henry and tried to lay the foundations of a beautiful friendship, but I would have none of it. For one thing because I knew he was in a set of Communist writers and painters of the rich pansy or promiscuous set. I forgot him . . . I forgot him so completely that there was a funny scene on Election Night when we went to Lord Kemsley's party and friends asked us to have supper at their table. I sat next to this young man, who was not a friend of my friends but of some friends of theirs to whom they were united solely by business interests. He recalled that we had met, and presently I remembered that he had been one of the anti-Mihailovitch boys, and coldly asked him if he was a friend of the MOST SUSPICIOUS CHARACTER and another one. When he said, "Yes," with a sweet smile, I turned my back on him. Afterwards, Henry (who had missed all this) told me it was Burgess. . . . I have always felt that there is a Communist very high up in the Foreign Office. . . . I have tried for years to get Orme Sargent, the former head of the F.O., to take this seriously but he wasn't a Communist but was a damned fool.

September 22, 1951: What a story! I cannot think how anybody could have doubted Elizabeth Bentley's story for a moment, there was so much collaborative material. It shows the strength of the movement to bewitch the press.

December 8, 1951: Elizabeth B is a queer fish, because she does not know what it is all about, even yet. . . . I admire her character and I am glad she acted as she did, but

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she does not seem to me a true anti-Communist. She would have stayed right there if Mr. Golos had not passed on to the next world.

February 5, 1952: It is absurd when a known anti-Communist like Graham Greene is denied a visa, it is worse when a scientist like Michael Polanyi, who is one of the most steadying anti-Red influences on young communists, and who has immense prestige owing to his unique talents, is prevented from entering America. I know Polanyi, and I know he is all right. If you can get me the American view of him I should be most grateful. I say it solemnly —this is a disaster.

February 6, 1952: Francis Biddle is certainly not a Communist or a fellow-traveller, but a damned fool, and he feels uncomfortable about the number of people he cleared when he was A.G. That is all I should say there was to it in his case, and anyways he cannot put a foot right just now.

April 21, 1952: I have reviewed Chambers' book for the Atlantic Monthly. A queer, queer creature, and one of those that never quite get the poison out of their blood. He talks a great deal of nonsense about the Communists, talking about the Party as if it were the early Church instead of the vast pork-barrel that it is.

August 28, 1952: In the beginning of a most mysterious political campaign! Practically no faction of either party is happy about what is going on. Only the commies & their followers are pleased. Everything is so inter-meshed now, the Kremlin might well be pushing the buttons. You have to be here to believe it. Otherwise, it's past belief.

November 10, 1952, DS to RW: The only disappointment I had about your review of Lattimore's book was that you had to be so prudent. I understand why, libel laws being what they are.

February 13, 1953: The Sunday Times has asked me to write two long, really long, hallelujah, articles on the Hiss Case and its aftermath. 3,500 words each. I intend to do a lot about the infiltration of the Civil Service. . . . I am so damned mad that my Tito Speaks review was killed. And so damned mad that Margaret Rhondda has been got hold of by a Foreign Office pork-barrel-pink (Charles Peake) and turned pro-Tito. But this opportunity partly consoles me.

March 30, 1953: I think that Senator McCarthy has put his foot in it badly, over the fleet of ships business, and I wish to God he had handled the Bohlen business differently. I wish he wasn't so much associated with the Investigation business, for which you and Jon[athan Mitchell, Stevens's husband and an editor at *National Review*] among other people have done far more. My references to him may not please you, but not for one minute do I let go of the principle of the thing.

March 31, 1953: We are getting shoals of letters over my Sunday Times articles—all terrified of McCarthy, whom they think of as an ogre that eats professors for breakfast.

August 21, 1953: I am being attacked right left and centre all the time, and feel much refreshed by such letters as I had the other day from Bertram D. Wolfe, which I felt an honour. . . . I did get a horrid feeling when I heard that there was a whispering campaign in London that I had gone mad, and that my articles on Communism were part of my madness. But I knew I was letting myself in for trouble when I decided to write these articles, and it is even a consolation to think that there cannot be many more years for people to do me hard, since really this policy of appeasement is so shameful. I think the reason for it here is that we are too tired by two wars, we are as France was after the First World War—but I wish to God we would be honest and say so, and not pretend that we were doing the right thing and wouldn't do differently if we could.

November 23, 1953: Normally I make about a hundred and twenty pounds a month from newspaper articles and weekly articles and reviews. My income during this period [since March] has been nil. (I don't mean this is the whole of my income, this is my British journalistic income, my bread and butter, on which the rest is kept for larger

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expenditures). Furthermore, the people in the Sunday Times who loathed my articles have been spreading the story that I am insane, asylum insane, and am not safe to employ or know. I shall weather this. But it is unpleasant, though as I knew I was in for some unpleasantness when I wrote those articles it is at least not a shock. . . . The real tragedy of the situation is Eisenhower's fatal weakness. They thought nothing of him at Columbia University, you know, because he was such an eternal compromiser. He never stood by anything or anybody, he fiddled. I don't think he holds aloof from Brownell and the anti-Communist campaign because he disapproves of what they do but because he can't bear to be attacked by the Democrats, which is a damn silly attitude for a Republican President. He should have talked out the situation relating to the scandal of the Democratic administration's infiltration long ago, and given his Party a line. He should have controlled Senator McCarthy; he shouldn't do this obliquely by letting the War Department give the impression that there was nothing of Communist infiltration in the Signals Corps, when the fact that there was is written into the Rosenberg trials. I fear he is a bad President, and that may be very awkward for us. . . .

July 1, 1955: The horrid Communism of people like these Oxford dons. It is all a mixture of greed and snobbery trying to keep its position in case of a revolution.

April 3, 1959: [RW's daughter-in-law Kitty] then added to her charm by telling me lightheartedly that yes, she had once been a Communist. "We all were," she said happily because of certain events. Now, I have asked her again and again if [RW's son] Anthony was ever a Communist, explaining to her that I wanted the knowledge in order not to hurt but to protect Anthony. She has denied any connection with the Party. I didn't quite believe her, and I threw myself on the mercy of the American authorities, with the aid of Norris, and told them that it might be that Anthony had been a Communist but that it would be a terrible thing if he were deported, and his naturalisation revoked, for his only chance of happiness lay in the States, and if he were sent back here he would certainly blame me and I would be terrified for my peace, if not for my life. . . .

October 16, 1953, DS to RW: As to Anthony: As everybody knows, practically all normal children go through a period of resentment against their parents when they are getting up their courage to leave home. When I stop to think about it, what is communism but an attempt to institutionalize that otherwise transitory emotion? Marx saw his problem as breaking the continuity of family and community attitudes. Only thus could the world get a new start. How important this became we all know from Communist children denouncing parents, etc. . . . Which leads me to my point: Isn't it possible that Anthony's lack of tenderness toward you comes . . . from his being overtaken by the party at a critical point so that as long as he remains under Communist influence he'll be perpetually in that phase just as a wooly mammoth overtaken by a glacier in Siberia remains fresh, tender and edible after twenty thousand years?

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Wallace Stevens's real world

by Donald Lyons

Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose has been edited by Frank Kermode, the author of, among other writings on Stevens, a fine little book published here in Grove's Evergreen Pilot series as *Wallace Stevens* (1961), and by Joan Richardson, the poet's biographer.[1] The volume contains the six published poetry collections—*Harmonium* (1923), *Ideas of Order* (1936), *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937), *Parts of a World* (1942), *Transport to Summer* (1947), and *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950)—plus four groupings of poetry: fourteen poems added by Stevens to the 1931 edition of *Harmonium*; twenty-five poems Stevens collected in "The Rock," the final section of *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (1954); twenty-nine poems written subsequent to *The Collected Poems* and here called "Last Poems"; and ninety-four uncollected poems arranged chronologically from 1898 (when Stevens was nineteen) to 1955 (the year he died). After three short plays (one in verse, two in prose) written in 1916 and 1917 comes expository prose: first, his 1951 collection of essays called *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*; then forty-nine uncollected essays, articles, translations, prefaces, responses to questionnaires, etc. Then come seven selections from the notebooks, including the famous aphoristic *Adagia*. Finally, there are five pages of journal entries from 1893 to 1903 and twenty letters from 1909 to 1955 that are either about poetry or to poets (e.g., Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Allen Tate). As usual in the Library of America, there is a full chronology, here eleven pages long, that amounts to a skeletal biography of the writer. Notes fill us in on variant readings, deletions, and French expressions. Assembled with scrupulousness and sensitivity, this is the Stevens text long needed.

Two of the prose works deal with insurance, which was, notoriously, Stevens's day job for most of his life. After Harvard (1897–1900) and a stint in journalism, he yielded to his father and got a law degree, at New York Law School, and landed, in 1908, a job in a bonding company. That led, in 1913, to the vice-presidency (second in charge of the New York branch) of Equitable Surety Company. When Equitable folded, he went to Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, where he was in charge of surety claims and the legal aspects of the bond department; in 1918 he became head of a separate fidelity and surety claims department, and he stayed there until he died. The first of the business essays, "Insurance and Social Change" (1937), is an investigation of the very possibility of insurance in a totalitarian state ("In the vast monopoly of Communism, insurance is itself a monopoly"); the second, "Surety and

1 *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, edited by Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson; Library of America, 1,032 pages, $35.

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Fidelity Claims" (1938), is a droll view of the life of a surety man:

> You never see a dollar. You sign a lot of drafts. You see surprisingly few people. You do the greater part of your work either in your own office or in lawyers' offices. You don't even see the country; you see law offices and hotel rooms. You try to do your traveling by night and often do it night after night. . . . After 25 years or more of that sort of thing, he finds it difficult sometimes to distinguish himself from the papers he handles and comes almost to believe that he and his papers constitute a single creature, consisting principally of hands and eyes, lots of hands and eyes.

It sounds like a mixture of Kafka and Hemingway (with whom Stevens once picked a fight in Florida).

I cite these essays not to prove that Stevens was, after all, grounded in and able to write about the real world but rather to show how that real world itself could express itself in the language of Stevens. Helen Vendler spent much of her review of this volume (*The New York Review of Books*, December 4, 1997) trying to insert Stevens into her concept of the real world, of "real life": the full version of his poem "Owl's Clover" contains, she insisted, "Stevens's critique of colonial exploitation of African wealth"; "the little-known and never-anthologized lyric, 'The Sick Man,' is a poem on the race question in America." (In fact, Stevens had the tart racial views that might be expected of a sharp-tongued conservative businessman of his time.) Furthermore, far from being a detached exquisite, Stevens was a heartbroken spouse, "the most devastating recognition in [whose] life was his realization that he had made a huge mistake in his early life for [his wife] Elsie." Now in a sense everything in Stevens's experience—a slant of light, a cat walking on snow, his marriage—went into the poetry, but not in the confessional mode implied by Vendler here. Stevens was not Robert Lowell, nor yet was he Yeats. In "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," a poem that seems to deal with the dying of love at forty, the poet warns, "But in our amours amorists discern/ Such fluctuations that their scrivening/ Is breathless to attend each quirky turn." Now eager to sentimentalize Stevens, Vendler once asserted in her valuable if tendentious *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (1969), in speaking of his greatest work, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," that "one signal claim relinquished by the poem is any overt social or human connection." Yesterday's bloodless mandarin has become today's avatar of correctness on imperialism and race, plus a man whose pain we can feel. Both thesis and antithesis are childishly reductive, products alike of blinkered times.

The poet's expository prose is interesting, not because it resembles "prose poems" as it has been the fashion to say but because it gives the illusion of thought. It has none of the greatness of the cooked verse, but we feel we are in the kitchen hearing the chef talk. In "The Irrational Element in Poetry," a lecture given at Harvard in 1936, we read,

> A day or two before Thanksgiving we had a light fall of snow at Hartford. . . . the moon was almost full. I awoke once several hours before daylight and as I lay in bed I heard the steps of a cat running over the snow under my window almost inaudibly. The faintness and strangeness of the sound made on me one of those impressions which one so often seizes as pretexts for poetry. I suppose that in such a case one is merely expressing one's sensibility and that the reason why this expression takes the form of poetry is that it takes whatever form one is able to give it. The poet is able to give it the form of poetry because poetry is the medium of his personal sensibility.

Or, as another poet had put it in 1921:

> When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or

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> the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.

This is, of course, Eliot's essay on "The Metaphysical Poets." The two men have, it is time to see, a lot in common.

Both Stevens and Eliot descend in good part from French poetry of the nineteenth century. Eliot, owing much to Baudelaire and Laforgue, saw it as his task to create a poetic language adequate to the rattled nervous system of the urban paranoid; Stevens, owing much to Mallarmé and Valéry, saw it as his task to make a case, in traditional verse forms, for the ontological and epistemological all-sufficiency of that poem-making faculty called the imagination. In the Harvard lecture, he speaks of Mallarmé and Rimbaud as champions of the irrational, but then on the next page he avers that "one writes poetry . . . in order to approach the good in what is harmonious and orderly. Or, simply, one writes poetry out of a delight in the harmonious and orderly." Knowing how much cacophony and disorder was abroad in 1936, Stevens attempts to see the poet as one "who wishes to contemplate the good in the midst of confusion." Civilization was not, to his shrewd eye, exactly on the march: "If you are not a Communist, has not civilization ended in Russia? If you are not a Nazi, has it not ended in Germany?" The lecturer fumbles, it seems to me, in trying to save the word "irrational" for the poet and deny it to Hitler and Stalin: "The poet cannot profess the irrational as the priest professes the unknown. The poet's role is broader, because he must be possessed . . . by the earth and by men in their earthly implications." He ends with a friendly reference to one of Eliot's demotic inventions: "We know Sweeney as he is, and, for the most part, prefer him that way. . . ."

The Necessary Angel (1951) collects seven lectures delivered from 1941 to 1951. The first two and the sixth have by far the greatest importance. In the first, called "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" and delivered at Princeton in May 1941, Stevens attempts to diagnose exhausted or moribund tropes of the imagination, ranging from an equestrian statue of Andrew Jackson to Plato's parable in the *Phaedrus* of the soul as a charioteer driving two winged horses. Plato's charioteer is heatedly dismissed as "gorgeous nonsense . . . antiquated and rustic . . . unreal for Plato as he is for us." Plato, schmato: Stevens's target is pretty obviously, as so often from "Sunday Morning" (1915) onward, Christianity—or at least what Hugh Kenner urbanely calls "a Christianity inculcated in Reading, Pa."

"The Noble Rider" is an entertaining performance, but it is in the second lecture, "The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet," read at Mount Holyoke in August, 1943, that Stevens offers—or seems to offer—a coherent *programme* for his lifelong enterprise. Seeking to counterpoise poetry to philosophy, he defines the former as "an unofficial view of being." "In philosophy," he goes on, "we attempt to approach truth through the reason . . . in poetry we attempt to approach truth through the imagination." What exactly, though, is the imagination? Well, it is something accompanied by pleasure, exhilaration:

> It is the *mundo* [Stevensian jargon for the interiorly realized world] of the imagination in which the imaginative man delights and not the gaunt world of the reason. The pleasure is the pleasure of powers that create a truth that cannot be arrived at by the reason alone, a truth that the poet recognizes by sensation. The morality of the poet's radiant and productive atmosphere is the morality of the right sensation.

We are not wrong to hear in these formulations echoes of Pascal and Augustine on God, but this is a new god: ". . . the poet must get rid of the hieratic in everything that concerns him and must move constantly in the direction of the credible."

This imagination is, it appears, not less than everything: ". . . the best definition of

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true imagination is that it is the sum of our faculties." And finally,

> Poetry is the imagination of life. A poem is a particular of life thought of for so long that one's thought has become an inseparable part of it or a particular of life so intensely felt that the feeling has entered into it. . . . the blue sky is a particular of life that we have thought of often, even though unconsciously, and that we have felt intensely in those crystallizations of freshness that we no more remember than we remember this or that gust of wind in spring or autumn.

Emerson said that Whitman sounded like a combination of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *New York Herald*; Stevens here sounds like a combination of T. S. Eliot (the insistence on intense thought and intense feeling), Kant, and Whitman (what is thought/felt becoming part of the thinker/feeler).

In "Imagination as Value," a lecture delivered at Columbia in September 1948, Stevens wrestles yet again with the elusive, protean quiddity of this faculty. Here it gets defined negatively by its opponents, which include logical positivism, Romanticism ("a failure of the imagination precisely as sentimentality is a failure of feeling"), Communism ("this feeble faith promis[ing] a practicable earthly paradise"), and idealism (of which religion now appears to be a subset). Positively, the imagination has become "the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal. . . . certainly, present-day European literature, as one knows it, seems to be a literature full of abnormality. . . . The truth seems to be that we live in concepts of the imagination before the reason has established them. If this is true, then reason is simply the methodizer of the imagination."

By now imagination is a power not only antithetical but anterior to reason; it is a demiurge bringing light, normality, and the dispersal of chaos. It is doing the work, in Stevens's rhetoric, of the God that failed him.

But if this theory of the imagination, or something very like it, was Stevens's philosophy, the question remains; what did he do with it? George Santayana, whom Stevens revered, wrote a book about philosophical poets as different as Lucretius and Dante. And, as Eliot insisted, "the possible interests of a poet are unlimited; the more intelligent he is the better; the more intelligent he is the more likely that he will have interests; our only condition is that he turn them into poetry, and not meditate on them poetically."

Did Stevens do more than meditate poetically—at least after *Harmonium*, which all agree to be sprightly and delightful? Perhaps the funniest indictment of Stevens's increasing addiction to "philosophizing in poetry" came from Randall Jarrell who, declaring poetry "a bad medium for philosophy," points to the philosopher-poet's "forlorn and absurd air as he works away at his flying tank, his sewing-machine that also plays the piano." But Jarrell, who was reviewing *The Auroras of Autumn*, quickly qualified his reservations and made it clear that he was talking about the Stevens of the 1940s, the man in his sixties. The great, largely (for him) early Stevens he calls "one of the true poets of our century, someone whom the world will keep on reading just as it keeps on listening to Vivaldi or Scarlatti, looking at Tiepolo or Poussin. His best poems are the poems of a man fully human—of someone sympathetic, magnanimous, both brightly and deeply intelligent."

Jarrell's generous and humane tribute is very different from such recent bullying appropriations as that of Harold Bloom in *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (1977), a book both grotesquely jargon-ridden (the likes of "transumptive," "kenosis," "clinamen," and "aporia" fall like bird droppings) and monomaniacally obsessed with a King Charles's head of a theory (on every—literally every—page Bloom insists that Stevens is groaning under the influence of Emerson, whom Stevens in fact disliked, and of Whitman, whom he liked well this

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side of idolatry). In other writings, Bloom maintains that John Ashbery is in his turn groaning under the weight of Stevens; while the theory is comically preposterous nonsense, it must be said that Ashbery does read like a nihilistic and frivolous debasement of Stevens's idioms and rhythms.

Jarrell is wrong, though, about the great late Stevens, work that at its best can be, in supple openness to life and mind, extremely moving. Speaking of meditation, take the 1952 short lyric, "The World as Meditation," written, like much later Stevens, in unrhymed triplets that ultimately go back through Eliot and Shelley to Dante and in what is still, I feel, blank verse, although one elastically stretched almost beyond recognition by epic dactyls. Penelope lies alone:

> Is it Ulysses that approaches from the east,
> The interminable adventurer? The trees are mended.
> That winter is washed away. . . .

The question is never resolved:

> But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun
> On her pillow? The thought kept beating in her like her heart.
> The two kept beating together. It was only day.
>
> It was Ulysses, and it was not. . . .

It is one thing to opine that imagination makes the world; it is another to embody the notion in verse like this. "Tennyson and Browning," said Eliot, "are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose." Stevens feels thoughts like roses.

The masterpiece among the later poems is "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," written and published in a limited edition in 1942, about the time of "Noble Rider" and "Figure of the Youth." "And for what, except for you, do I feel love?" begins the eight-line preface addressed to the poet's "interior paramour," his muse. In three jussively titled parts—"It Must Be Abstract," "It Must Change," "It Must Give Pleasure"—each consisting of ten twenty-one-line cantos in triplets, the poet interrogates the colors, weathers, quirky noises ("hoobla-hoobla-hoo," "ké-ké"), epicurean tastes ("We drank Meursault, ate lobster Bombay with mango/ Chutney"), and wacky personnel (the President, the statue of General Du Puy, Nanzia Nunzio, the maiden Bawda, Canon Aspirin) of his cosmos. It starts as an almost Platonic lesson-poem:

> Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
> Of this invention, this invented world,
> The inconceivable idea of the sun.

But it ends in a sweet, hapless, puzzled love:

> Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night,
> How is it I find you in difference, see you there
> In a moving contour, a change not quite completed? . . .
>
> . . . flicked by feeling, in a gildered street,
> I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.

The whole poem is as beautiful and lush and delicate and intelligent—and intermittently as tragic—as Rilke's *Duino Elegies* (1923) and Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1942), its partners on the heights of our century's meditative verse. How Rilkean Stevens often seems. How Stevensian Rilke can seem. Both were intensely thinking seers.

Wallace Stevens's poetic personality, ripe and relatively sober in "Notes," had burst upon the world in *Harmonium*, published in September 1923, when the writer was—"already," as people say—forty-three. What a time, by the way, that was for American verse: Eliot's *Waste Land* and Stein's *Geography and Plays* in 1922; Frost's *New Hampshire* and Williams's *Spring and All* in 1923; Moore's *Observations* in 1924; Pound's *A Draft of XVI Cantos* in 1925. Although

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"modernism" seems too simplistic a label for forms as diverse as those of Frost and Stein, there was a common air they breathed.

With what impudent brio, what steely coolness, did *Harmonium* sound its themes and voices and curves of line! The themes—the top ten ideas that get taught in survey courses—are sparely articulated in poems like "Of the Surface of Things," "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," "Anecdote of the Jar," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon." These virtuoso works affect one after a while as rather arid illustrations of dogma. Yes, yes, I see, it's the inner eye that constructs the world.

It is a mark of Stevens's rigor and guts that he confronted the dark night of the imagination, the terror of blankness in *Harmonium*'s poems such as "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" and two much superior works, "The Snow Man"—one long sadistic sentence that slowly coils and chokes like a metaphysical boa constrictor—and "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad,"[2] with its battle between hope and despair as enacted in the rhythms of the last line ("One might. One might. But time will not relent"). These two are poems of winter and summer, those totalitarian seasons that take up so much of the Stevensian weather.

Harmonium contains three supremely successful full-blown meditations: the opaque but haunting "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," which is about love and vision at forty; "Sunday Morning," which is about the difficulties of home-made nature religions; and "Peter Quince at the Clavier," an etude on the paradoxes of beauty. Two end at evening; two in the downward swoop of birds. Metrical mastery marks all three. The fifteen-line stanzas of "Sunday Morning" are written in enjambed blank verse of an amplitude and gorgeousness unheard since Keats and Wordsworth. The blank verse of "Monocle"'s eleven-line stanzas is Shakespearean in its theatrical and sinewy self-dramatization. "Peter Quince" employs, for the most part, tetrameters that, at different moments, echo and loosen those of Marvell.

There are, finally, in this first collection, poems of a teasing and tropical sexuality, often laced with farce. Stevens had started visiting Florida, the setting of many of them, in 1916—not that Stevens's places need ever be literal. The raunchy, non-Eliotic wit of "O, Florida, Venereal Soil," of "Last Looks at the Lilacs" (an especially droll scenario), of "Two Figures in Dense Violet Night" (spoken by a sexually frustrated woman and beginning, "I had as lief be embraced by the porter at the hotel . . ."), and of "Nomad Exquisite" (an encapsulation in miniature of Stevens's entire metaphysic of poetry) is still underappreciated.

Stevens, like anybody, has his longueurs and repetitions and failures. But monotony is not one of the things I found in a prolonged immersion. Rather, his dignity of mien is ever likely to be challenged by a multifaceted wit; his high and noble sobriety is always expecting to be interrupted by wryly comic specificities; his aphoristic certainties are eager to quiz themselves gently or jerkily. It's as if Plato, no mean musician, were to have written dialogues full of eccentrically labelled characters (half farcical, half allegorical), defiantly rude noises, circuslike delights. The cooperative existence of such registers of song is pleasurable evidence of a very great poet's adequacy to life.

2 Two bibliographic issues attend this poem. Although written in 1921, it was included in *Harmonium* only in the expanded edition of 1931. Also, Stevens omitted from that printing four crucial and brilliant lines on summer (they end, "Horizons full of night's midsummer blaze"). The current editors include these lines in a note.

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Lorenzo Lotto in Washington

by Karen Wilkin

In the spring of 1993, the most discussed, most not-to-be-missed exhibition in Paris was an extravaganza at the Grand Palais, "The Century of Titian: The Golden Age of Painting in Venice." It was a glorious assembly of pictures not only by Titian, but by his predecessors, contemporaries, colleagues, and followers—Giovanni Bellini, Giorgione, Sebastiano del Piombo, Veronese, Bassano, and Tintoretto, among others. Despite its ambitious title, its stellar array of artists, and its astonishing number of visitors, the show was neither a wide-ranging survey of High Renaissance art in La Serenissima nor a crowd-pleasing blockbuster, but rather a tightly focused, scholarly examination of a particular aspect of sixteenth-century Venetian painting during the years, roughly, in which Titian was at work. What was that aspect? How Venetian painters responded to the *maniera moderna*, the "modern style" that was proposed by Giorgione's innovative art at the beginning of the century and developed by the younger, far-longer-lived Titian as the 1500s progressed. To demonstrate their thesis, the curators of the exhibition marshalled some of the most celebrated paintings of the period, but equally important were pictures by less-familiar practitioners, painters not exactly obscure, but probably better known to art historians than to most of the eager viewers of "The Century of Titian." Some of these were lesser talents who had obviously profited a great deal from the example of their more brilliant fellows, but among this "supporting cast" there were happy surprises—works by artists who, while admittedly not up to the level of Titian at his most potent, were not only accomplished and worth taking seriously, but original and extremely personal. Among the most distinctive paintings in this category were half a dozen or so works by Lorenzo Lotto.

In the context of the show at the Grand Palais, Lotto's suavely painted pictures looked at once typical of Venetian paintings of the period and, well, a little peculiar. An elegant, black-clad man staring out of a half-length portrait, his head oddly tipped and his shoulders strangely angled, mashed one hand down on a tabletop covered with rose petals, tiny flowers, and what looked like a miniature skull. A crowded vision of Christ and the adulteress was packed with brutal, almost caricatured faces and wildly gesticulating hands. Even the most "Venetian" of the Lottos at the Grand Palais, a Holy Family with angels and John the Baptist as a chubby toddler washed in form-revealing light, was set apart by its atypical iconography and its idiosyncratic color. In it, John is shown, for once, without his identifying lamb, but accompanied by his mother and, surprisingly, his father, while a range of brilliant blues, from icy off-white to celestial cerulean, sets up rhythms that play havoc with the rational spatial disposition of the figures. Paintings like these were among the most individual and unexpected

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in the exhibition, leaving no doubt that unlike many of his fellow Venetians, Lotto's responses to the *maniera moderna* were, to say the least, complex. He was plainly of the *century* of Titian; he was not of the *circle* of the Venetian master.

He could easily have been, however. Lotto and Titian were near-contemporaries. Lotto, born in Venice about 1480, was the older of the two by less than a decade—a little younger than Giorgione. (Titian outlived Lotto, who died in 1557, by almost twenty years.) Both were trained in Venice, but there the resemblance largely ends. There is no ambiguity about which artist was more celebrated, both in his lifetime and afterwards. Lotto enjoyed a respectable career in his day, but he spent a considerable part of it outside of the city of Venice itself.

The provincial-born Titian, who came to Venice as an apprentice, remained that city's principal painter until his death. Lotto, by contrast, moved frequently, probably, it is believed, in pursuit of commissions. There were periods when he worked in Venice, where he produced some of his best pictures, perhaps stimulated by the presence of his gifted contemporaries, but he spent most of his working life in the Marches, in Ancona and Recanati, and in the outer reaches of the Venetian sphere of influence, in Treviso and Bergamo (home of the commedia dell'arte), where he enjoyed the support of influential patrons and was entrusted with the execution of major altarpieces. There were also wrenching disappointments. After attracting the attention of the pope with an altarpiece for a church in the Marches, Lotto won a coveted commission for decorations in the Vatican, but the results were received without enthusiasm and were soon replaced, so there were no further papal awards. Lotto's work continued to be in some demand in the provinces for the rest of his life as a painter, yet toward the end of his career his art was little admired in Venice. He was, for example, one of the few artists of reputation not recruited to embellish the Doge's Palace. Perhaps most damaging was an open letter written by Pietro Aretino in 1548 in which the powerful critic compared Lotto unfavorably with Titian and complimented him not on his achievements as a painter, but on the strength of his religious convictions.

The pious artist died in the provinces, in Loreto, in the Marches, where he had become a lay brother in the religious community of the famous basilica. After his death, Lotto's work sank into relative obscurity, perhaps because Vasari, in his essential, gossipy chronicle of Renaissance art, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, gave Lotto only the briefest of mentions, praising his colors and sleek surfaces. The painter was never totally forgotten, but, even though he signed and dated a remarkable number of pictures, some of his most overtly "Venetian" efforts were often attributed to his better-known contemporaries.

Lotto's *oeuvre* wasn't sorted out until 1895, when Bernard Berenson published a pioneering monograph on the artist, a model of Berenson's method of close scrutiny and exacting connoisseurship; this ground-breaking study, later revised by Berenson himself, remains a fundamental text. Lotto didn't attract anything resembling widespread attention until a major exhibition was mounted in Venice in 1953 (which prompted Berenson's revision of his book). Closer to the present day, the five-hundredth anniversary of Lotto's birth in 1980 triggered what has been described as a "veritable explosion of interest in his work," at least among art historians, who have been busy ever since, sifting through the unusually complete written records —letters, an account book, and a will—left to us by Lotto, examining the context in which he worked, and bringing that information to bear on his surviving paintings.

The recent intensification of interest in this eccentric, highly individual (and, happily, well documented) artist has culminated in a fascinating exhibition that sums up the state of modern Lotto scholarship to date. Until

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March of this year, scholars, art lovers, and merely curious visitors to the National Gallery, Washington, will have an opportunity to deepen their acquaintance with this puzzling painter—and broaden their understanding of Venetian Renaissance painting, in general—through a well-chosen, handsomely installed show of about fifty works, spanning Lotto's entire career.[1] It's not quite as seductive or ravishing an exhibition as last year's stunning overview of the work of Georges de La Tour, but it's an occasion that shouldn't be missed.

Not that Lotto seems any easier to come to grips with, even if you pay close attention to the works exhibited at the National Gallery and read the helpful wall texts that keep track of the peripatetic artist's restless changes of residence and unravel the arcane symbolism of his pictures. Lotto looks as eccentric as ever—quirky, unpredictable, and, in terms of the formal aspects of his paintings, all over the place. He seems to have been drawn to a range of sometimes contradictory influences. He plainly understood—and mastered—the lyrical, simplified *maniera moderna* of Giorgione and Titian, with its generous, geometrized forms and its unifying play of light. Yet Lotto's work bears witness to his consuming interest in the lavishly detailed, crisp Gothic manner that survived in the work of both the Northern Renaissance painters and an older generation of Venetians, most notably the doyen of the city's painters at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Giovanni Bellini. In Washington, you can watch Lotto now explore the possibilities of one approach, now flirt with another, forging an individual style out of this artistic turmoil. At times, he seems like several different artists: one who delights in sharply delineated forms and small anecdotal details, and another who still takes pleasure in such particulars, but subverts them to strong unifying rhythms and firmly modeled forms, so that specifics function not as ends in themselves but to add character and meaning to portraits or religious scenes.

Sometimes Lotto resembles one of those hard-to-classify sixteenth-century artists (much loved by professors setting difficult slide identification quizzes) born and trained in the Netherlands, whose style and iconography were deeply affected, but not completely transformed, by years of working in Italy. The Neo-Gothic and the *maniera moderna* jostle for dominance in Lotto's work, but no matter which mode prevails, he is always an original and surprising colorist—as Vasari rightly noted. Witness the lively orchestration of blues in that *Holy Family with Angels* (c. 1536–37, Musée du Louvre), last seen at the Grand Palais, or the stunning copper, dull green, and cream harmony of the magnificent *Portrait of a Lady as Lucretia* (c. 1533, National Gallery, London), one of Lotto's most splendid efforts.

Lotto came by his apparent aesthetic schizophrenia legitimately, since he was just old enough to have had first-hand exposure to potent examples of both the Northern Neo-Gothic manner and the new "giorgionism" of golden light and pastoral themes. He would have been about fifteen, an apprentice painter, when Dürer visited Venice in 1495—he certainly knew Dürer's woodcuts later on—and he would have seen the works by Bosch that were exhibited in the city about the same time. Lotto wasn't the only Venetian painter of the *cinquecento* to admire the legacy of the Gothic style—his near-contemporary, Vittore Carpaccio, was a master of this kind of detailed, anecdotal realism—but like any aspiring young artist of the day, he certainly would have

1 "Lorenzo Lotto: Rediscovered Master of the Renaissance" opened at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, on November 2, 1997, and remains on view through March 1, 1998. The exhibition will travel to the Accademia Carrara di Belle Arti, Bergamo (April 2–June 28, 1998) and to the Galleries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris (October 12, 1998–January 11, 1999). A catalogue of the exhibition, by David Alan Brown, Peter Humfrey, and Mauro Lucco, has been published by the National Gallery of Art and Yale University Press (237 pages, $55; $29.95 paper).

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been aware that after about 1500 Venetian painting changed radically under the influence of the *maniera moderna*—as evidenced by the ascendency of pictures with large-scale figures bathed in warm light and set in closely observed, but idealized, landscapes. Lotto is recorded as a painter—that is to say, one with his own studio—in Treviso, not far from Venice, on the mainland, by 1503, and although he may have been there as early as 1498, it's obvious from his surviving pictures of this period that he was cognizant of new developments, no matter what use he chose to make of them.

In some of Lotto's pictures, the ideal and real seem to battle it out, often reaching a kind of negotiated ceasefire, resulting in images characterized by large-scale forms, broad modeling, and form-defining illumination, along with a wealth of telling details and a powerful sense of the particular, unidealized individual. In the end, though, Lotto appears to have been most sympathetic to the clarity and specificity of Northern art. Perhaps, as a deeply religious man, he rejected the *maniera moderna*'s link with pagan themes, with the Venuses and scenes from mythology that the Venetian aristocracy so prized and so proudly installed in their houses and public buildings. Perhaps he simply enjoyed replicating the particulars his keen eye observed. Perhaps he wanted to establish himself as an individual painter with a style unlike the prevailing norm. Whatever the explanation, Dürer, rather than Titian, seems to have been the artist Lotto admired most.

Lotto's "Northern" qualities are palpable throughout the Washington show. The collapsing frontal Madonnas of his Pietàs, the forward-facing poses of the protagonists in his Annunciations, the craggy faces of his saints and shepherds, the carefully observed, ordinary details that encapsulate complex symbolic meanings, the pellucid blue-green landscapes, all insistently recall Netherlandish and German prototypes. Yet they do so without entirely overwhelming the essentially Italian, classical underpinnings of Lotto's art. It's reminiscent of the way Botticelli, after Savanarola put the fear of God into him, reverted in his late religious paintings to the symbolic, hierarchical scale and traditional iconography of Gothic art, but never completely eliminated hints of the enthusiasm for the art of antiquity that informed his early "pagan" compositions. Or, to leap forward a few centuries, across oceans and cultures, it's reminiscent of the way Stuart Davis's work affirms his belief that all images, no matter how "abstract" or simplified, had to be based on the irregular, observable reality of the actual experience, if they were to be expressive.

The uneasy coexistence of seemingly opposed impulses frequently energizes some of Lotto's best work—the Lucretia portrait, for example, or the enchanting *predella* panels with scenes of the life of Saint Lucy, three charming, wonderfully colored genre pictures that include a sparely decorated chapel, busy little dogs, and a failed martyrdom involving teams of oxen and the immovable, imperturbable saint who continues to harangue her persecutors as the oxen strain to drag her off. Yet even in Lotto's most firmly organized, large compositions—in major altarpieces such as the ambitious *Saint Nicholas in Glory with Saints John the Baptist and Lucy* (1527–29, Santa Maria dei Carmini, Venice)—there's little of the rational, harmonic symmetry we associate with important Venetian "public" paintings of the time. Lotto arranges his three saints in an orderly, conventional enough triangular grouping, but then does everything he can to knock the picture out of balance, shifting poses, changing the arrangement of drapery, and even the number of angels from one side of the picture to the other. The effect is faintly awkward rather than dynamic, but the vast, evocative landscape (derived from Netherlandish models) beneath the hovering saints and the cool, inventive palette (Lotto's own) are enough to redeem the picture; the surprise of Saint Lucy's pink scarf and tangerine cloak against her dull green dress is a particular delight.

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Lotto seems to have been at his best in portraits, since the genre permitted him to exploit his taste for the specific to create a thoughtful likeness and, often, an expressive setting. That focusing on the head and shoulders of a portrait eliminated the compositional problems of multi-figure groups was another plus. It is obvious from the selection of pictures in Washington that from first to last in his career, Lotto's portraits were some of his strongest efforts, powerfully individualized characterizations in which small anecdotal details function not to distract us or to interrupt larger rhythms, but to enhance our understanding of the sitter. The black-clad man I remembered from Paris is there—the smashed flowers and tiny skull under his hand symbolize blighted hopes and melancholy, according to the text panels—along with a group of equally fine male and female portraits from Milan, Vienna, London, and New York.

One of the most intimate and unusual portraits is a sensitive, deeply felt depiction of a goldsmith, probably one of Lotto's good friends, shown from three different viewpoints. Among the stars of the exhibition is the celebrated portrait of the Venetian merchant and collector, Andrea Odoni (1527, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II), surrounded by fragments of antique sculptures. Painted during the artist's return sojourn in Venice in the late 1520s and 1530s, the picture is at once an example of Lotto's most accomplished *maniera moderna* and a demonstration of how he transformed the "modern style" approach through his devotion to the specific. It has been suggested that the painting was a deliberate challenge to Titian's preeminence as a portraitist; certainly the picture is at once Titianesque and unique. The subdued palette of silvery greys and pale, creamy ochres seems unusual for Lotto, as does the way the gesticulating, substantial Odoni moves easily in space, filling the canvas, and the way cool, dusty light knits figure and sculpture fragments together. But the spreading, radiating composition is Lotto's own, and the unmistakably individual, unidealized image of Odoni, with his fleshy nose and broad, stubby hands—a type you still meet in Northern Italy—could have been painted only by someone who relished the details of actuality as much as Lotto did.

Lotto's small devotional pictures, commissioned by private patrons, often succeed for the same reasons that his portraits do. (That his works of this type were deemed extremely desirable is graphically demonstrated in the Washington exhibition by two paintings from the early 1520s, each a Madonna and Child with saints, obviously produced to satisfy demand; the central pair are nearly identical, while the saints and background differ, in response to the special requirements and taste of the families who commissioned them.) Such paintings were meant for private use in domestic spaces, which meant that Lotto didn't have to worry about the requirements of images—such as altarpieces—designed to be read across the length of a chapel. Large paintings intended to be contemplated from a distance demanded firm, architectural compositions, never Lotto's greatest strength; intimate devotional pictures, like portraits, allowed him to make use of his ability to observe carefully, while, in addition, they allowed the profoundly observant artist to express genuine religious feeling.

There is a great deal of pleasure to be had from specific paintings throughout the thought-provoking Lotto exhibition at the National Gallery, but the cumulative effect of seeing so many Lottos together is perhaps more interesting than almost any single picture in the show. The conflicting influences evident in the painter's work, the sense of his aspiring constantly to excellences not entirely within the mainstream of Venetian painting in his day, make you reexamine your conception of the Renaissance. I kept thinking—once again—of the aptness of the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's famous image of the transition from the medieval period to the Renaissance; Huizinga suggests envisioning not the inexorable forward progress of a turning

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wheel, but overlapping waves washing up on a beach, each reaching inland a different distance. Lotto's work bears out the accuracy of this perception. His "Northern" and "Gothic" qualities, his taste for the irregular and the specific, rather than the classically simplified, evidently coexisted with his mastery of some of the most up-to-date aspects of Venetian painting of the *cinquecento*. He was by no means a reactionary painter, nor was he seen as one by his patrons, but rather an ambitious, gifted artist with slightly different aspirations than many of his more acclaimed peers and colleagues. As one of the exhibition's curators, David Alan Brown, puts it in the catalogue's introduction, Lotto "represents, within the context of Italian Renaissance painting, a distinct stream of his own with strong affinities to artists working north of the Alps." This is not to suggest that Lotto was as good as Titian or even as Veronese at his best. He wasn't. But as the Washington show makes abundantly clear, he is a fine painter who rewards close attention.

Yet there are plainly many reasons, other than sheer aesthetic interest, why the slightly "marginalized" Lotto should warrant attention just now. The essays and entries in the exhibition's informative, readable catalogue (which illustrates each exhibited work but muddies Lotto's tangy color) make it clear that even though Berenson is given full credit for having reclaimed Lotto's *oeuvre*, largely on the basis of rigorously informed connoisseurship, present-day Lotto scholars have other concerns. Thorny details of chronology and the painter's relations to other artists continue to absorb some historians, but others have been probing questions about Lotto's religion, his patrons, and especially, it seems, his use of allegory and symbol. (There's also an engaging essay about Lotto as a collector and connoisseur of Turkish carpets.) The complicated, "disguised" meanings in Lotto's paintings, the elaborate symbolic messages presented in the form of naturalistic details, like the crushed rose petals and little skull in the portrait of the man in black, which would have been fairly readily intelligible to Lotto's contemporaries, offer compelling challenges to present-day art historians. A large part of the catalogue entry on the portrait of Andrea Odoni, for example, is devoted to various scholars' attempts to identify the subjects of the sculpture fragments surrounding the collector—or at least, what their subjects were believed to be in Odoni's day. It is generally agreed that the painting is not an "innocent" depiction of a collector with his collection, since only one work can be identified unequivocally as having belonged to the merchant. The represented sculptures, it is assumed, were not chosen at random, but carry abstruse meanings, which scholars have attempted to decipher. Interesting? To be sure. But that's not what makes the portrait such a stand-out in the exhibition. But Berenson knew that. He would have been delighted by the show.

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Six poems by Umberto Saba

translated & with an introduction by Geoffrey Brock

In 1911, two years after Marinetti spawned Futurism, the all-but-unknown Umberto Saba (1883–1957) wrote his own manifesto, which sadly never had the impact of Marinetti's; it remained unpublished until after Saba's death. His tract, titled "What Remains for Poets to Do," begins with typical directness: "It remains for poets to make poetry honest."

Today, when much poetry seems *merely* honest, it may be difficult to appreciate Saba's prescription. But Italian poetry was emerging from the *decadentismo* of Gabriele d'Annunzio, who could falsify "passions and admirations . . . for the sole wretched end of gaining a more striking stanza or a more resonant line." Saba's charge mirrors Auden's indictment of his younger self for espousing in "Spain" a "wicked doctrine . . . simply because it sounded to me rhetorically effective."

The Italian avant-garde in 1911 was even more dishonest than the arrière-garde. In their zeal for newness, Futurists jettisoned what Saba (a classicist at heart) saw as the virtues of their poetic heritage. Their innovations, as Joseph Cary points out in *Three Modern Italian Poets: Saba, Ungaretti, Montale*, "were the dragooning of so-called 'free-verse' as a counterblow to the traditional hendecasyllable, eccentric suspensions of normal syntax and punctuation, a plethora of short-lived onomatopoetic coinages, the cultivation . . . of the fragment, . . . and an impudent, jazzy, informal 'oral' style." It was, Saba felt, mere novelty that arose from what he dubbed their "uncontrollable desire to be original."

The path to authentic originality led, he believed, through the forest of the self, and his was more dense and difficult than most. Religion, nationality, sexuality—elements that, for many, are cornerstones of identity were for Saba lifelong question marks. Born Umberto Poli to a Jewish mother and a non-Jewish father who left before his son was born, Saba grew up among Jews but admits, "I never felt myself anything but an Italian among Italians." This national identification was complicated, however, since for half his life his native Trieste was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His sexual identity, too, was blurred: homosexual love poems stand alongside love poems to his wife. Even that emblem of personal and familial identity, the patronymic, was abandoned—as his father had abandoned him. Giuseppe Ungaretti once referred to Saba as "the poet of himself," and indeed he seemed to forge his vexed identity in the reflective, autobiographical poetry of his principal work, *Il Canzoniere*, first published in 1921 and revised and enlarged until his death.

Saba ignored trends such as Futurism and Hermeticism all his life. While this fact makes him hard to pigeonhole, it helps explain why the honesty and updated classicism evident in these poems remain compelling long after the fashions changed.

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Ulisse

Nella mia giovanezza ho navigato
lungo le coste dalmate. Isolotti
a fior d'onde emergevano, ove raro
un uccello sostava intento a prede,
coperti d'alghe, scivolosi, al sole
belli come smeraldi. Quando l'alta
marea e la notte li annullava, vele
sottovento sbandavano piú al largo,
per fuggirne l'insidia. Oggi il mio regno
e quella terra di nessuno. Il porto
accende ad altri i suoi lumi; me al largo
sospinge ancora il non domato spirito,
e della vita il doloroso amore.

Amore

Ti dico addio quando ti cerco Amore,
come il mio tempo e questo grigio vuole.
Oh, in te era l'ombra della terra e il sole,
e il cuore d'un fanciullo senza cuore.

Il vetro rotto

Tutto si muove contro te. In maltempo,
le luci che si spengono, la vecchia
casa scossa a una raffica e a te cara
per il male sofferto, le speranze
deluse, qualche bene in lei goduto.
Ti pare il sopravvivere un rifiuto
d'obbedienza alle cose.
E nello schianto
del vetro alla finestra è la condanna.

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Ulysses

Once in my younger days I sailed the length
of the Dalmation coast. Islets of rock
lilied the surface of the water, perches
for the occasional bird intent on food.
The rocks were slick and algae-draped and bright
as emeralds in the sun, but when high tide
or night concealed them, any sail with wind
would veer toward deeper water to avert
their treachery. And now I am the king
of no man's land. The harbor-lights are lit
for others; I again turn to the sea,
still driven by an unextinguished spirit,
by this excruciating love for life.

Love

I say goodbye when I approach you, Love,
as this age and this gray would have me do.
There was the shadow of the earth and sun
and, oh, the heart of a heartless boy in you.

The broken pane

It all conspires against you. Nasty weather,
lights that keep going out, and the old house
jolted by every gust. It's dear to you
for what you suffered in it, for the hopes
dashed there, and for a few good times as well.
Survival seems to you a refusal to obey
the way of things.
And in the shattering
of a window pane, you hear a judgment passed.

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Sera di febbraio

Spunta la luna.
Nel viale è ancora
giorno, una sera che rapida cala.
Indifferente gioventù s'incontra;
sbanda a povere mete.
Ed è il pensiero
della morte, che, in fine, aiuta a vivere.

L'arboscello

Oggi il tempo è di pioggia.
Sembra il giorno una sera,
sembra la primavera
un autunno, ed un gran vento devasta
l'arboscello che sta—e non pare—saldo;
par tra le piante un giovanetto alto
troppo per la sua troppo verde età.
Tu lo guardi. Hai pietà
forse di tutti quei candidi fiori
che la bora gli toglie; e sona frutta,
sono dolci conserve
per l'inverno quei fiori che tra l'erbe
cadono. E se ne duole la tua vasta
maternità.

Al lettore

Questo libro che a te dava conforto
buon lettore, è vergogna a chi lo crebbe.
Parlava come un vivo ed era (avrebbe
dovuto, per decenza, essere) morto.

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February evening

The moon appears.
                The avenue remains
sunlit, though evening has begun to fall.
Indifferent youths will gather here,
scatter toward small aims.
                And it's the thought
of death that helps us, after all, to live.

The sapling

Today is made of rain.
Morning looks like evening,
spring like autumn,
and a great wind is blasting
a sapling that holds—surprisingly—steady;
it stands above the plants like a boy
grown too tall for his green age.
You watch, filled with pity,
perhaps, for all those pale flowers
stripped by the gales; they are fruit,
they are winter's sweet
preserves, those flowers that fall now
to the grass. And you grieve in your vast
maternity.

To the reader

This book, Good Reader, though a balm to you,
shames its creator and should go unread.
Although he spoke as a living man, he was
(or should have been, for decency's sake) dead.

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Theater

Peddling air

by Mark Steyn

I was in London before Christmas, promoting my new book, *Broadway Babies Say Goodnight*. Don't worry, this isn't a plug—the book's not out on this side of the Atlantic. But, as the title suggests, one of its themes is the decline of the New York theater, a diagnosis my savvier TV and radio interviewers were eager to dispute. Good heavens, they cried, almost to a man; Broadway babies aren't saying goodnight, they're back with a vengeance! Why, this is the best New York season in years! There are bona fide hits like *Titanic* and *The Lion King*. There's *Triumph of Love* and *The Life*. Look at the reviews for *Side Show*. Dig the buzz on *Ragtime*. Don't forget Paul Simon's *Capeman*—the first in an invigorating infusion of work by big-time baby-boom rockers, such as Simon, Randy Newman, Billy Joel, Jimmy Buffett, all part of the golden generation that has enriched every other aspect of American life. And, if you're the sort of recalcitrant old fuddy-duddy who prefers Neil Simon to Paul, why even he's back, belatedly recognizing that decamping to off-Broadway was a mistake and that the main stem is still where it's at. There are Broadway's own classics, lovingly revived, such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*. There are raucous satirical romps, like *Jackie: An American Life*. And, for better or worse, America has even found its own Andrew Lloyd Webber in Frank Wildhorn, composer of *Jekyll and Hyde* and *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

I did my best to point out the various fallacies at work here and sportingly offered, on air, some increasingly reckless five-figure bets on the number of these productions that would still be running in a year's time. But I really needn't have bothered. By the time I returned to New York, *Side Show* had posted its closing notices, and so had the new Neil Simon play, *Proposals*. *Triumph of Love* had announced its "last weeks," as a desperate bid to shame the public into coming. Even the great baby-boom invasion force was in danger of turning into the Battle of the Bulge: *The Capeman* postponed its opening, and a succession of mainstream legit play-doctors, from Mike (*The Graduate*) Nichols to Nicholas (*Carousel*) Hytner to Jerry (Mister Broadway) Zaks, were spotted slipping surreptitiously through the stage door of the Marquis.

All these various disappointments have their own stories to tell. But as emblematic as anything of Broadway's current condition was the announcement by Mayor Giuliani just after Christmas that, as part of his plan to revitalize Midtown, landmark theaters would be allowed to sell their valuable "air rights" to developers on other blocks. This was one of those news items that have you checking the masthead to make sure it isn't April 1st. "Air rights" are exactly that: the rights to the air above a building—i.e., to nonexistent upper floors which could otherwise be built if these historic theaters hadn't been listed. If I understand the

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scheme correctly (and thinking about it too closely tends to bring on a headache), by selling these rights to building lots on, say, the other side of Eighth Avenue, the theater owners would enable a developer to double the size of his own air rights and thus entitle him to erect a 500-floor ziggurat rather than some humdrum, low-rise 250-story operation. According to the mayor, transferring their air a few blocks across town would net the theater owners a (so to speak) windfall of about a hundred million dollars. Personally, I doubt it. The Spanish practices of the theater unions will inevitably take significant chunks out of the sum: doubtless there's some fusty agreement rashly signed many decades ago insisting that a vast unionized labor force is required to erect scaffolding above the theater, dismantle the air, put it in packing crates, and ship it across town in Teamsters trucks. But, of whatever's left, 20 percent will go to something called the Broadway Initiative, which will encourage the production of straight plays. Thus, a new golden age of playwriting will be built, literally, on air. As Clifton Webb sang, airily, in *The Little Show* (1929):

> I tried to reach the moon
> But when I got there
> All that I could get
> Was the air.

You don't have to examine the scheme too rigorously to suspect the theater community is spending so much time in the upper atmosphere that its collective brain is suffering from a lack of oxygen. The flaws are obvious. The theater owners—the Shuberts, Nederlanders, and Jujamcyn—don't need more money: their problem is not a lack of money to spend, but a collective unwillingness to *control* spending. That's what's made the economics of Broadway almost impossible for straight plays. When the theater waxes nostalgic about the days when sixty new plays a season would open on the Great White Way, they forget that those kinds of plays are so far removed from what we now understand by the term as to make comparison useless. You don't have to go back to the great days of Belasco's spectacular tableaux: in 1935, Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset* had nineteen principals plus assorted pedestrians and urchins; even in 1947, William Wister Haines's *Command Decision* could muster eighteen principals. Today, a New York play is a handful of actors mooching about on a single set. The truism that creativity flourishes best under constraint has been tested to breaking point. For surely all the four-handers and three-handers and two-handers—*Same Time Next Year*, *Love Letters*—have been done. Even the little post-modern tricks, in which the playwright acknowledges the doubling-up of characters forced on the actors, have all been worked into the ground: the second act of A. R. Gurney's *Sylvia*, in which the female psychoanalyst is played by a man and taunts his client for being unsure as to which sex he is—all very droll, but there aren't enough of these jokes to go round every play.

Doubling-up only really works in something like Gip Hoppe's *Jackie: An American Life* (at the Belasco), in which Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis is played (hilariously, but also oddly movingly) by Margaret Colin, one hundred and fifty supporting characters are played by half-a-dozen other actors, and everyone else, including LBJ, Joe Kennedy, and the entire Rat Pack, is played by puppets: the approach works not only because the entire evening is pitched as a kind of high comedy version of a TV variety sketch, where the hokiness is part of the charm, but also because it's supportive of Hoppe's entire strategy. The ominous portentousness of his subtitle evokes the solemn iconification of Camelot biographies, whereas, in fact, Hoppe has assembled his portrait of Jackie almost entirely from trivialities. The really cunning thing is that this isn't so much an indictment of Mrs. Onassis as a sly meditation on the shallow *reductio* conferred by modern celebrity. Besides, whether or not you agree with his characterization of the eponymous heroine is up to you, but you can't argue that the play's

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production values aren't gleefully consistent with the author's thesis.

Meanwhile, down at the other end of the spectrum, in Tina Howe's *Pride's Crossing* (at Lincoln Center), Cherry Jones plays Mabel Tidings Bigelow, a Boston Brahmin who in the Twenties swam the English Channel but, in Miss Howe's glib equation, failed to swim free of her own restrictive, class-bound family. The play itself mostly paddles around in the shallow end, but Miss Jones is one of the best reasons for going to the theater and, in the most delightful, compelling way, she brings Mabel to life—at ninety, at ten, as a stooped old lady with a walker, as a Channel swimmer, as a middle-aged Back Bay hostess . . . These changes are accomplished without make-up, with minimal costume changes and often in full view of the audience: we have become used to the way the economics of theater have forced us to confront the mechanics; these days, like the Pompidou Center in Paris, the plumbing is all on the outside. Miss Jones is one of the few actresses who can rise above the cheese-parings and prevent them from becoming distractions. She is so immersed in the character that she seems to project her from within, her hands, her back, her voice falling into the sounds and rhythms of each stage of life, gnarled and palsied and hunched without need of stick-on wrinkles or dowager's hump. But one can't say the same for the supporting players—the three men, two women, and a little girl who divide up the remaining nineteen characters. Angie Phillips, a woman, plays Mabel's brother Phineas and looks like she's auditioning for *Victor/Victoria*. On the other hand, Dylan Baker, a man, gets the part of the Irish cook, Mary, and comes on like a bosom-hoisting dame from a British panto, or, at any rate, *Charley's Aunt*. This cross-dressing is specified in the text, but it's difficult to see for what reason, except as a way of containing the number of actors required. Miss Howe, for her part, offers a rather woolly metaphor about how drama is usually either white-gloved (a pose) or bare-handed (primal) and she wanted to do both simultaneously etc. The point is, this *is* a distraction, and a fatal one, for it reminds you that Miss Howe is utterly incapable of creating plausible subsidiary characters with any life of their own. Miss Jones is enchanting, but the overwhelming impression given by *Pride's Crossing* is of a form that's exhausted, that's not just economically bankrupt, but creatively as well. The plays of those crowded Broadway seasons of seventy years ago not only filled the auditorium, they filled the stage, too. Audiences have rightly concluded that there's something wrong with a system that demands you pay fifty-five bucks to sit at the back of a thousand-seat house watching two actors try to fill a vast, empty, minimally accoutred stage. Even if the Broadway Initiative winds up with twenty million dollars of "air rights," you'd be really hard put to find a bigger waste than sinking it into the stunted, barren straight plays a generation of dramatists has been raised to write: there are only so many stories that can be told in this form, and we've seen most of them.

The cannier producers and playwrights seem to have realized this. Broadway's most successful straight—if "straight" is the *mot juste*—dramas of recent years, David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, are in essence musical-sized plays—or, if you like, musicals that happen not to have scores. And, given that the very last reason for seeing *Starlight Express* or *Grand Hotel* or *Titanic* is the score, that's clearly no great loss. But what about all those playwrights struggling in the vast territory between the bargain-basement mini-dramas and the epic pageants? This season, they include the new Neil Simon, the new Mamet, and Alfred Uhry's *The Last Night of Ballyhoo*. But, despite its Tony awards, *Ballyhoo* can't even attract thirty-five hundred New Yorkers a week to the Helen Hayes. And, when *Proposals* closed after a mere seventy-six performances at the Broadhurst, it was painfully clear that, in the wake of *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, *Lon-*

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don Suite, and the musicalized *Goodbye Girl*, Neil Simon's long reign—from the late Fifties to the late Eighties—as Broadway's most bankable playwright has come to a close.

Unlike *London Suite*, the most tired retilling of overworked soil even from this dramatist, *Proposals* was almost desperate in its determination to emphasize how eager the author was to expand his horizons. For one thing, it was set out-of-doors—a striking departure for a playwright whose feet have always seemed reluctant to stray off the broadloom. For another, it featured young people—by which I mean young people of today, not autobiographical youths from the Forties and Fifties. Even the director was a young(ish) person: having fallen out with genial Gene Saks, Simon had turned to the fashionable gay Joe Mantello. The curious effect was of an author in strained conflict with his own instincts. *Proposals* is set in the Poconos, at a family reunion at a summer house, over which divorce has already cast its shadow and death is about to cast a longer one. The wisecracks are the sort you'd expect from the pairing of Neil Simon and the Poconos, but, portable as his one-liners often are, they seem weirdly out of place here—as if the director and cast had plucked them from a hat on the way into the theater and have no very clear idea what they mean. The jokes seem to be at war with the play's underlying melancholy: the feeling here is both less sentimental and more intense than *Brighton Beach Memoirs* and *Biloxi Blues*, and the elegiac, summer's-end quality makes its failure all the more poignant.

The reassuring explanation would be that Simon had strayed too far from his natural turf, and so turned away his natural audience without attracting anyone younger, or less Jewish. But that theory strikes me as slightly suspect. *Proposals* was playing to about 50 percent capacity, but, on the other hand, so's the revival of *The Sunshine Boys* at the Lyceum—and that's a production that panders to Simon's core audience in every particular. This is the one about Lewis and Clarke, two cranky old vaudevillians reunited for a TV special. It brims with one-liners—many about show biz, many about Jews, and most of the rest about the rival pleasures and pitfalls of New York and New Jersey. Plus this is a double-act whose two halves loathe each other, so there's tons of insult comedy, which is easy but undoubtedly effective. Plus the play draws on nostalgia for a bygone era, a lost world: not many people, even among theater audiences, actually remember the good old days of vaudeville, but so pervasive is this particular strain of nostalgia that most people have a vague memory of remembering the good old days when other people remembered vaudeville. Plus the production benefits from a double-nostalgia insurance policy: playing Lewis and Clarke are Tony Randall and Jack Klugman. Even if you don't remember any real vaudeville double-acts, everyone remembers Randall and Klugman as a TV double-act on *The Odd Couple*, the sitcom based on another Neil Simon play.

Klugman, since his battle with throat cancer, has developed a slight rasp which only underlines Willie Clarke's irascibility and slovenliness; in turn, age has refined Randall's dandified ornateness, making Al Lewis even more precious. In other words, Klugman and Randall are still playing the Odd Couple, merely transferred to another Simon plot. The defect is that you're all too aware that they're only pretending to hate each other, that they really love each other, and they know we love them, too. But that's only a defect if you wander along to the Lyceum expecting drama; if you're in search of a warm, fuzzy, modestly starry, agreeably undemanding night on Broadway, it couldn't be bettered. The whole enterprise is constructed as a pithy summation of the Simon universe: Jewish jokes, Jersey jokes, nostalgic theme, nostalgic cast. And yet, and yet . . . At the box office, it's doing as sluggishly as *Proposals*. Can it really be that in just a few years Simon's audience has fled to Florida retirement communities and other

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celestial waiting rooms? Or is it that there's now no audience for *any* straight play on Broadway beyond the most limited of limited runs?

Well, for the moment, *The Old Neighborhood*, David Mamet's trio of one-acts, is holding its own at the Booth. The neighborhood is unspecified, but we can assume it's Chicago. Returning to his childhood haunts is Bobby Gould (Peter Riegert), who appears in all three plays and recedes further and further from our grasp in each one. His life, his calling isn't specified here, but, if you know your Mamet, you'll remember he was a Hollywood hotshot in *Speed-the-Plow* (with Madonna) and a resident of Hades in *Bobby Gould in Hell*. Anyway, Bobby is now the quintessential Mamet protagonist, which is to say he spends all three plays sitting around listening to someone else kvetching for half an hour. In the first play, "The Disappearance of the Jews," it's Joey (Vincent Guastaferro), a childhood chum who runs a deli but dreams of living in a *shtetl* where the struggle for survival would have reinforced his sense of manhood. Or, alternatively, he dreams of murdering his wife and kids and skipping across the border to disappear into Canada's Arctic wastes. In the second play, Bobby's sister Jolly (Patti LuPone) bitches about her crummy childhood and the way mom's second husband is selling the family silver and cutting her out of her inheritance. In the third play, we tremble momentarily on the brink of dramatic interaction: Bobby has stirred himself sufficiently to half-heartedly issue an invitation to his ex-girlfriend Deeny (Rebecca Pidgeon) to start over again. Instead, Deeny goes on about gardening and the way other people only think they have good taste whereas she's one of the few who actually does.

Perhaps Mamet is indulging, at Broadway prices, in some whimsical self-parody or a malicious wind-up of his audience. But, if this arid, sterile, unflinching exercise in Mamet mannerisms (Mametisms?) is for real, then it's not only above the theater that Broadway's been reduced to selling empty space. Bobby is a cipher's cipher, a human being from whom all human impulses—emotion, reason, prejudice, attraction—have been squeezed dry. His three chums wear their lack of self-knowledge like medals. To be sure, all manner of great fictional characters have done that, but Mamet gives the impression that to force his dramatis personae to confront this lack would somehow be obvious or crass or conventional. *The Old Neighborhood* is not *our* old neighborhood: we eavesdrop on these people, and their conversation is like that of fellow diners overheard at an adjoining table—dumb, boorish, embarrassing, mystifying. But we leave the restaurant and forget about them because we have no deeper investment in them. Engagement, shrugs Mamet, is squaresville; who needs it? Mamet is very cool at passing himself off as non-Broadway, a maverick strolling carelessly through Shubert Alley. But, in some ways, he's become the most Broadway playwright of all: a man whose plays aspire to the condition of dinner afterward.

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Art

Talking at cross purposes: Piet Mondrian & Ad Reinhardt

by Mario Naves

Devotees of geometric abstraction this season would be hard put to find a gallery exhibition more impressive than "Mondrian and Reinhardt: Influence and Affinity"[1] at PaceWildenstein. Borrowing important works from museum and private collections, the gallery offered a tête-à-tête between the seminal modernist and a painter known for his forbiddingly austere canvases. PaceWildenstein has garnered a reputation for mounting museum-caliber shows matching artists whose connection is, at times, tenuous. That commercial considerations play a part in such pairings is understood. Hitching Reinhardt, whose estate the gallery represents, to Mondrian is a gambit designed to enhance the former's stature. Still, perhaps a specialized exhibition such as this one—which required an eye sympathetic to an often difficult brand of abstraction—could only be attempted by a gallery. If "Influence and Affinity" was not as provocative as the recent coupling of Bonnard and Rothko, it was first-rate nonetheless.

The question that arises is, What artist who has pursued geometric abstraction doesn't share an affinity with Piet Mondrian (1872–1944)? The genre itself all but stems from Mondrian, not to mention the fact that he is arguably the greatest abstract painter, geometric or otherwise, of this century. The uncompromising nature of Mondrian's vision has inspired even those artists whose work diverges stylistically from that of the Dutch master. (William Baziotes, that painter of cryptic biomorphs, considered him a hero.) Yet the school of Mondrian was never as influential as Cubism. Mondrian's Spartan aesthetic—with its dramatic reduction of pictorial elements—had a finality to it that seemed closed. Yet, it wasn't entirely. There has been accomplished and important painting by followers of Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism. There were his cohorts in *de Stijl*, of course, but also underrated American artists such as Burgoyne Diller and Ilya Bolotowsky. One could add Philip Guston during his Ab Ex period and, maybe, the hardedge painter John McLaughlin to the mix as well. Seen in this context, Reinhardt seems as likely a painter as any for bouncing off Mondrian.

Or is he? Although Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967) was associated with the New York School, he was far from the typical "action painter." His commitment to a stern geometry is characterized by symmetry and anonymity: no (as the artist had it) "wiggly line" painting here. Reinhardt's best known—and, in the case of his black paintings, infamous—canvases are closely valued cruciforms that, at first glance, read as monochromes. His rejection of the incidentals of painting, or what Reinhardt thought of as the incidentals, was unyield-

1 "Mondrian and Reinhardt: Influence and Affinity" opened at PaceWildenstein, New York, on October 24, 1997 and closed on December 13.

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ing. He wasn't interested in essentializing painting so much as negating it. For some, Reinhardt's stoicism is imbued with spirituality, as if the more vacant a painting is the closer it comes to God. Yet, given the convolutions of artistic practice since his death, Reinhardt's hardheadedness is, if not awe-inspiring, then honorable. Reinhardt may have been something of a nihilist, but he never gave up on painting.

What was illuminating about "Influence and Affinity" wasn't the colloquy that took place between the two painters, but that such a dialogue never really got started. Put another way, there was less affinity than met the eye. True, both artists pursued a stringent kind of geometric painting. Reinhardt was up-front about the influence of Mondrian on his own work, and the installation stressed the two painters' stylistic correspondences. But such similarities can be misleading. Placing Reinhardt's *October* (1949) near Mondrian's *Church at Domburg* (1914) made for a rudimentary kind of sense: both works are in black and white and composed of gridded lines. In their approaches to art-making, however, they are different—indeed, radically so. *October*'s staccato markings establish an all-over pattern, but the rhythms are less enticing than lulling. In contrast, Mondrian's charcoal marks are inquisitive, breathing life into the two-dimensional format. For Reinhardt, painting is a matter of filling up a surface; for Mondrian, it is a matter of inhabiting one. This is more than a question of artistic temperament; it's the difference between an ideologue and a painter.

Reinhardt's ideology was aesthetic, not political. "Painting in art is not painting," wrote this self-described dogmatist, his curious prescriptions for art suggesting a sardonic humor absent from his work. Reinhardt predicated each painting on a conception of what it would be, or, more accurately, what it must not be. Aside from the actual process of putting paint to canvas—which can impose its own logic—Reinhardt's canvases were arrived at before they were physically realized. Such an approach doesn't discount good painting—it's the final result that counts, after all. But Reinhardt's paintings are pure pedantry. Before reaching its maturity, Reinhardt's approach was less strident: *Red Painting* and *Abstract Painting, Grey* (both 1950) have the luminosity of the later red and blue paintings, but also space and a frankly stated brushwork that the later paintings lack. Admittedly, the earlier works display less conviction than *Abstract Painting, Red* (1952), a typical Reinhardt. One wonders if it isn't this unswerving conviction of Reinhardt's, rather than the paintings themselves, that his admirers esteem. In a culture inundated with fashion, who can blame those who look on Reinhardt's steadfastness with a certain reverence?

Reverence, in this case, is a form of nostalgia, and Reinhardt's quest for the ultimate painting has a quaint air about it. There is nothing quaint, however, about the work of Mondrian. What was startling about seeing his paintings in proximity to Reinhardt's was how snappy they were. Again, this is partly a matter of style. Reinhardt's canvases are dour and theatrical in contrast to Mondrian's crisp and considered compositions. What painter wouldn't look like the life of the party next to one of Reinhardt's black holes? Yet, Mondrian's mastery made his disciple's rigor seem more obstinate than usual. What is extraordinary about *Composition with Yellow* (1930), for instance, is that it's as fresh as the day Mondrian laid the last brush stroke on it. His geometries may have had Theosophical hocus-pocus as their basis, but Mondrian never lost sight of the concrete imperatives of his chosen medium; painting may have given him a grounding (and a freedom) that metaphysics, ultimately, could not.

Despite its self-imposed limitations, Mondrian's work was pliable, even playful. As anyone who visited the great retrospective at MOMA a few years back knows, Mondrian never settled for the comforts of mere style. Even in the handful of works at

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PaceWildenstein, one saw him trying this, trying that—taking chances. One saw it in the press of gravity in the columnar midsection of *Composition No. III, White-Yellow* (1935–42) or in the way a red square surreptitiously slips behind the scaffolding of *Composition with Red, Blue, Yellow, Black and Grey* (1922). The results of Mondrian's discerning attention to the dynamics of composition were precise, as well as quirky—a quality unknown to Reinhardt. Asymmetry did not suit the younger artist's vision. Dynamism had to be jettisoned, it seems, to make way for the greater unity that symmetry provided for Reinhardt.

Symmetry is not in itself boring, but neither does it guarantee a composition that can hold our interest. Having said that, Reinhardt's *oeuvre* isn't without interest. His accomplishment is a real, if narrow, one. The paintings can be reassuring—with Reinhardt "what you see is what you see" over and over again. Their rigidity, however, is as easy to identify as it is to pass by. Mondrian's paintings, on the other hand, are as audacious as the latest hip-hop hit emanating from a passing car. If this analogy seems farfetched, remember that Mondrian loved jazz; the rhythms in his work can be punchy as well as elemental. His paintings are as alive today as they were in 1922—or, for that matter, as they will be in 2022. This will not be the fate of Reinhardt's paintings, which have more of a period flavor than his fans would like to admit. "Influence and Affinity" was instructive and memorable, but the dialogue exhibited was really more of a polite disagreement.

Exhibition notes

"Jake Berthot: New Paintings and Drawings"
at the McKee Gallery, New York.
November 7–December 20, 1997.

"Rodrigo Moynihan: The Late Paintings"
at the Robert Miller Gallery, New York.
December 9, 1997–January 24, 1998.

"Stuart Shils: Irish Landscapes"
at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.
December 4, 1997–January 3, 1998.

Dark clouds have silver linings. An incidental consolation of the shift that has occurred in the visual arts in recent decades—the triumph of preconceived form over achieved form—is that the old battle between abstraction and representation has ended. Not because one side defeated the other, but simply because the theater of war moved on as it does in real war when technology changes. Nowadays, to paint or sculpt at all expressively in an art world where painting or sculpting must be done ironically—better still, deconstructively—is to ally oneself, as an artist, with a project diminished in its intellectual respectability. Yesteryear's arguments now seem like futile civil strife. Nonetheless, among the brave few, the most common way such painters describe themselves these days is "somewhere between figuration and abstraction," which is where, with sensitive hindsight, all great painting always was anyway.

And yet, there is still a sense of occasion, a *frisson* of triumph or transgression, when a stalwart of one camp moves to the other. The late Rodrigo Moynihan made something of a habit of alternating between abstraction and figuration: his late self-portraits and still lifes were the subject of a recent exhibition at the Robert Miller Gallery. Jake Berthot, meanwhile, who exhibited landscapes at the McKee Gallery, is a painter whose reputation was secured on the basis of abstract work. The art world is not sufficiently resigned to the shift of aesthetic goal posts for such a switch to go wholly unremarked. That his audience should view his turnaround not just as a development but as an event betrays a certain nostalgia for the lost culture of painting in which the old heroics meant something. Of course, compared to the young Jackson Pollock's departure from the ranks of the regionalists or Philip Guston's portentously existential mid-career readmission of personal subject matter, Berthot's change

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of heart is a minor adjustment. We don't need to rewrite the art history books for him.

Berthot did not take his faithful entirely by surprise when he started painting trees recently. The abstract style for which he was recognized in the 1980s was the lyrical, romantic kind that teeters on the brink of meaning. His was a subjectivity that always hinted at a subject. It is one thing, however, for a painter to accommodate, or follow, intimations of the perceived world within an essentially abstract practice, another for the same painter to go out and draw from nature. Mr. Berthot is reported to have built himself a country studio in the middle of woodlands where he has taken up landscape design to carve out interesting views for himself from his ample windows. On hearing this information from the artist's dealer, David McKee, I couldn't help recalling Max Ernst's anecdote about his father, a Sunday painter, who was so irked by a tree in the middle of his garden that he left his easel to chop it down for the sake of the composition on which he was working.

The elder Ernst was "driven to abstraction" in pursuit of the real. Of Jake Berthot it is tempting to postulate the opposite, that by turning his attention to the real he has sought to tighten-up an abstraction endangered by ethereality. I find Berthot's treatment of landscape both compelling and confounding. These pictures exude intense intellectual energy but one that, at times, elicits irritation as much as admiration. Images are built up from an accumulation of marks, some purposive, some more tentative. The interplay between looking and feeling is what is most exciting here, but really troubling is the residue of underdrawing and measuring, what it is there for and what it is trying to tell us. Berthot brings out the schoolteacher in his viewer: A+ for effort, but has there been a bit of cheating? One suspects that quite a few lines have been left (added even) as mere tropes of inquiry, as a kind of conceptual decoration. This then throws the whole of his painterly project into doubt. The fact that trees are outlined means that the small dabs of color are not so much the "*petits sensations*" out of which form emerges but, rather more modestly, a kind of filling-in. Berthot at first seems Cézannesque, but on closer inspection he is much closer to Gauguin. The clusters of trees are iconic. For all the artfully scattered evidence that "he looked," his landscape is synthetic, not perceived.

As a young man in the 1930s, the British painter Rodrigo Moynihan launched a short-lived movement he called "Objective Abstraction"; his own efforts were prototypes for Abstract Expressionism (a contemporary spoke of "explosions in a jam factory"). But by the end of the decade social conscience got the better of avant-garde experiment in Moynihan's case, and he fell in line with the gritty, dour brand of realism promoted by William Coldstream and his followers at the Euston Road School (Claude Rogers, Graham Bell, Lawrence Gowing, and others). Moynihan's principal reputation is for his large figure compositions of the 1940s, meticulous and atmospheric works like the *Medical Inspection* (probably his masterpiece, in the collection of the Imperial War Museum) and the group portrait of the faculty at the Royal College of Art where he was eventually professor of painting. In 1957, however, he reinvented himself once more, quitting his teaching post and resigning from the Royal Academy to go to France and pursue *tachisme*. This about-face echoed a similar move by Victor Pasmore, who had also been involved with Euston Road before coming out as a constructivist. Moynihan was destined for yet another shift of gear, however, producing a late body of cool, measured realist works. Robert Miller's exhibition was of this period, concentrating on still lifes and self-portraits.

The Robert Miller Gallery has been a consistent champion of this British painter all but forgotten in his own country. For me (a Londoner), this quiet, dignified, and restrained body of work was something of a revelation. Actually, quietude, dignity, and

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restraint are precisely the qualities associated with Euston Road and its muddy, undemonstrative, and introverted realism. I don't know Moynihan's abstract efforts in the flesh, but they have always looked pretty tendentious in reproduction, abandon seeming not to bring out the best in him. What is remarkable about his later return to realism, however, is the degree of elasticity and *jouissance* he found possible within observationally exacting procedures. He is demonstrably compelled by the actuality of the things he paints, by how they catch light, by how paint catches them. A favorite composition places various studio artifacts —bottles, Roman sculptural fragments, rolled paper, crockery—upon a sharply angled shelf which is itself isolated against an expanse of wall, or of less specific space. These pictorial devices simultaneously highlight the individual objects and exaggerate their elusiveness. There is an interesting interplay between the graphic and the painterly within a typical late Moynihan in which the more realistically proportioned the objects are the more artificial they seem, whereas loose, relatively spontaneous, suggestive marks seem to pay off in illusionistic terms. Ironically, the "freest" oil sketches in the show, depicting a reflection of the artist with a nude model, are the most trapped within a fusty Euston Road look. The tighter and sparer his approach the more lush and light-filled are the results.

Stuart Shils's small Irish landscapes shown at Tibor de Nagy are painterly equivalents of cream cakes: one feels foolish for enjoying them so. These pictures are atmospheric, tastefully muted in color, the paint whipped up and then speckled with cute observational details. His diction is borrowed from Sargent, Constable, Turner, and Corot, although his felicity is his own. The aesthetic code of the twentieth century is unforgiving of the twin vices in which these paintings abound—prettiness and comfort. Gauguin's dictum that nothing that is pretty can be beautiful coupled with Greenberg's invective against "safe taste" drag on one's conscience. But we are so used to tolerating the abject and depraved in the name of art that it seems churlish to balk at charm. Shils's tone captures the feel of wet Irish fogginess with the precision of a barometer (one title refers to a "pea souper"—a thick fog—neatly conforming to the culinary metaphors suggested by Shils's handling of paint). Furthermore, his seemingly indulgent touch—at once fluid and frothy—actually belies fierce compositional intelligence. Smooth they are, like Guinness—or indeed like the loquacious drinkers of this beer in the very countryside depicted—but smoothness is not a crime. Guinness is good for you!

—*David Cohen*

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the recent publication of the following: *Modern Poets of France: A Bilingual Anthology*, by Louis Simpson (Story Line Press, $16.95) and *The Eighties: A Reader*, edited by Gilbert T. Sewall (Addison-Wesley, $26). Portions of both first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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Music

The Sibelius question

by Alexander Coleman

The musical reputation of the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius (1865–1957)—deified in the Twenties and Thirties by conductors and public alike, declining markedly in the Forties, and hitting a very deep bottom from the Fifties on—has taken another turn. His shares are up. There is now once more a Sibelius Question. No such thing as a Stravinsky Question or even a Schoenberg Question troubles the sleep of music critics: their respective reputations are secure for the time being.

The renewed controversy about the musical viability and the simple quality of Sibelius's music was the subject of a series of performances and a symposium in December at Avery Fisher Hall titled "Northern Lights: The Music of Jean Sibelius." Sir Colin Davis and the London Symphony performed three concerts of five of the seven symphonies of the Finnish master, plus a few tone poems and some songs for soprano and orchestra.[1] His less-abundant chamber music was represented by a recital by the Lark Quartet, assisted by the pianist Samuel Sanders. The two-week survey featuring intermittent concerts and discussions ended with a lieder recital of Sibelius's songs by the baritone Jorma Hynninen.

In addition to this musical overview, there was an all-day symposium on December 6 under the general aegis of Professor James Hepokoski of the University of Minnesota.[2] Professor Hepokoski gathered together eminent Sibelians from the United Kingdom, Finland, and the United States to ponder such topics as "The Development of a Voice: Influences on Sibelius," "Controversies Surrounding Sibelius," and "The Legacy of Sibelius." The upshot: over the figurative dead bodies of Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg, Sibelius's music still commands a large and fervent audience. What is more surprising, his works are having a considerable effect on contemporary compositional habits—in the work of John Adams, for instance—and this in turn has to do with something like a reaction against the "progressive," more or less atonal language of what was the dominant mode of compositional expression for decades after the Second World War, an admixture of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Webern, Alban Berg, and Béla Bartók.

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1 The London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Sir Colin Davis at Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center, New York, performed Sibelius's Symphony No. 4, Five Songs (Katarina Dalayman, soprano), and Symphony No. 7 on December 5, 1997; *Lemminkäinen's Return*, Symphony No. 3, and Symphony No. 5 on Dec 7, 1997; and *The Swan of Tuonela*, Violin Concerto (Kyoko Takezawa, soloist), and Symphony No. 2 on December 8, 1997.

2 "The Sibelius Symposium," featuring James Hepokoski, Glenda Dawn Goss, Matti Huttunen, Robert Layton, Alex Ross, Robert Spano, and others, was held at the Stanley Kaplan Penthouse, Lincoln Center, New York, on December 6, 1997.

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As is the habit among academics, the personality and character of Sibelius himself were held at arm's length—and this is understandable, for even during the composer's lifetime he was notoriously diffident about his own world view and absolutely silent about his compositional methods. He had nothing to say to conductors when they came to ask advice about how his music should be played. (Finally in 1943, he did supply metronome indications for his scores at the behest of conductors but remained mute on stylistic points.) Sibelius had pretty tough things to say about recordings of his work, above all as directed by British conductors—Sir Thomas Beecham, for instance—who advertised themselves as "specialists" in Sibelius. More of this later.

When someone from the audience at the symposium asked about Sibelius's intellectual formation, his core philosophical beliefs, his readings, there was absolute silence. The experts had nothing to say on the matter, though there was some mention about his being a "pantheist" and something of a "mystic." Indeed, there was a certain aspect in Sibelius that might respond to such a description. Gifted with perfect pitch, he associated certain colors with certain notes and at times key signatures, and did so from earliest childhood. When his secretary Santeri Levas asked him what his favorite color was, Sibelius responded by saying that "it is a clear green, somewhere between D and E-flat." According to Levas, "Then he sang that note to me and went to the piano to check it. He had got it exactly. For the D (on the piano) was a shade lower than the note he had sung, and the E-flat noticeably higher."

Sibelius always knew that he would be cursed with longevity: "In a meeting I once said that everybody who was there would be dead before me. Naturally they protested that no one could know that precisely. . . . I knew it with complete certainty, and they're all long since dead." His dream-life was especially rich.

> Once he spent some months in Japan (in a dream), although the period of dreaming was limited to hours. In the morning he even remembered that his correspondence (from Finland) was forwarded to him from a *poste restante* and that each day he fetched his letters from the post office. He dreamed a great deal about Japan, although he had never been there. . . . In other dreams about Japan, he was always in the same large square, but new buildings appeared that had not been there in earlier dreams.

Sibelius was also something of a psychic, and often frightened and astonished those close to him when these divinations were expressed.

And then there is the matter of his carefully-groomed personal appearance. As the founding father of the expression of Finnish nationalism in epic musical terms, Sibelius always cultivated in his maturity and old age the granitic appearance of the dour, heroic Finn, symbolic of his nation's recent history, its struggle for independence from Russia above all. Although painted portraits of the composer as a young man show him with a fiery red head of hair, he carefully shaved whatever was left and made sure that he looked more and more sculpted and stony as he aged. This desired image was confirmed by the famous chiaroscuro black-and-white photographic portrait of Sibelius with eyes closed, taken by "Karsh of Ottowa" in 1949, by now the most-disseminated image of the composer.

Although most of the participants in the symposium, out of decency and reverence, did not want to mention particular personal traits of the composer, it is well known that he drank like a fish and would carouse with friends for days on end. Absenting himself from his family for more than a few lost weekends, he caused much anguish for his wife, Aino, and their five daughters. He was maniacally extravagant, had a household of five servants, and was constantly hounded by debts, although a governmental honorific pension granted in 1897 did ease things a bit. He had a very bad case of hand

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tremor, which a few think may have been at least partly responsible for his curtailed career as a composer.

The overwhelming fact about the life of Jean Sibelius is its sheer span. Born in 1865 into a Swedish-speaking family (Finnish was an acquired second language), Sibelius was something of a late bloomer as a student violinist and composer. He was in Vienna by 1891, received gruffly but with distant admiration by Johannes Brahms. He also conversed with and gave work to a very old man who had been Beethoven's piano tuner. His tone poems *En Saga* (1892) and *Finlandia* (1899), together with his first symphony (1899), had established his reputation as a musical innovator by the turn of the century. He was treated as an equal by Gustav Mahler in an impassioned meeting and conversation in 1907, and was championed by both Richard Strauss and Ferrucio Busoni. Enthusiasm for his work grew both in England and in the United States, with performances by Karl Muck and Max Fiedler in Boston—all of this well before the Great War.

In the Twenties, Sibelius's place in the vanguard had slipped. His works faced increasingly stiff competition and criticism from such composers as Stravinsky and Schoenberg, whose respective revolutionary musical languages had been well-established prior to the war with Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) and Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (1913). Faced with the incessant propaganda by these composers' critical and conductorial minions—and sensing that these musical developments could not be incorporated into his own very original manner of organizing and displaying sound in the orchestra—Sibelius essentially withdrew from the contemporary music scene only to undergo the torture of living too long, all of ninety-two years. Sibelius's last major works were the Symphony No. 7 (1924) and the tone poem he wrote for the conductor Walter Damrosch in New York, *Tapiola* (1925). His death in 1957 put an end to a creative silence that had lasted some thirty-two years. Indeed, so unsure of his gifts had he become that Sibelius almost didn't send *Tapiola*, his last masterpiece. By all accounts, there did exist finished movements for an Eighth Symphony, but, despite endless importuning from conductors and impresarios, Sibelius threw what he had finished of the work, along with a laundry basket full of other manuscripts, into a furnace in the mid-Forties.

Sibelius and his silence after 1925 were the inevitable subject of speculations on the part of the participants in the symposium. Much emphasis was put on his ever-increasing self-criticism, on how he would destructively brood over negative reviews while taking no delight in praise. Conversely, the positive reception of his last two works from the mid-Twenties may have instilled doubts as to whether he ever could do any better. The destructive element finally won over the creative, but even leaving off composition gave him no peace. As Sibelius said to Santeri Levas, "Heaven on earth begins when man forsakes self-criticism." Since there would be no more works to self-criticize, an earthly heaven might have been unconsciously awaited by the composer after he essentially abandoned writing serious music. But as the years dragged on and national adulation turned to world-wide deification—and as he compulsively kept on working under this severe sense of inadequacy—the possible portrait of a happily silent composer never could be drawn. It cannot have been easy: living as a national monument when one is already a statue.

Another prior instance of creative silence—the thirty-nine years left to Gioacchino Rossini after the composition of *William Tell* (1829)—is another matter. Rossini had done all that he wanted to do and thought he *could* do. Consequently, he decided to pack it in, travel around Europe in his carriage adorned with innumerable bells, and enjoy life. He did write some piano pieces and wind music, but his opera writing was finished.

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Leaving these thoughts aside, there was a recurring subtext to the symposium and to the informative notes supplied by Professor Hepokoski for the program booklet accompanying the symphony performances by Sir Colin Davis and the London Symphony. This subtext had nothing to do with Sibelius or his work, but it did have a lot to do with the political-cultural warfare of the Twenties and Thirties and the history of musical modernism. In short, Sibelius gradually came to be considered the bandleader of musical conservatism. For his many critics, he was a composer who wanted to have it both ways—to be both modern and traditional. Of the younger generation from the 1920s, Paul Hindemith might be taken as a figure who represented this tendency to some degree. Arnold Schoenberg himself never hid his contempt for such compositional compromises, since he saw himself as a genius whose musical language corresponded exactly to the necessities and exigencies of the age into which he was born—the generation after Mahler and Strauss. It was a matter of historical inevitability; the step had to be taken. Schoenberg was not above a witticism on the matter: "The middle way is the only road that *doesn't* lead to Rome."

At the symposium, in a clever pedagogical strategy, Professor Hepokoski played the devil's advocate *against* Sibelius, reciting succinctly the arguments put forth by the avant-garde against the composer. For a start, Sibelius was a holdover from the Romantic age; he was "expressive" in the old sense and utterly devoid of ironic reference. He was obviously incapable of learning creatively from Schoenberg, Stravinsky, or anyone else, and this was why he folded his tent: he couldn't survive as an equal among the Young Turks. On a darker plane, the criticism mentioned the fact that the mystical, neo-pagan *Naturgefühl* emanating from Sibelius's music found an echo in the "blood and soil" atmosphere of Aryan cultural superiority then rampant in Germany. The fact that Sibelius did not reject a Goethe prize proferred by Hitler and was cultivated by Goebbels was an index, his critics averred, of how pernicious were the forces represented by his music. The new music, his opponents went on to say, is urban, intimately related to technology, the life of the city, the free consciousness in total experimentation with new sounds and new materials. Sibelius was a throwback to a musical barbarism.

This was war. And, as Dr. Kissinger informs us, in war there are winners and losers. Among the cognoscenti, Sibelius lost. Let it be said that the anti-Sibelius forces in Europe and in the United States were a formidable lot. They had blistering artillery manned by such good soldiers as Theodor W. Adorno, René Leibowitz, Nadia Boulanger, Virgil Thomson, and B. H. Haggin, among others.

The arguments against Sibelius that the Frankfurt School Marxist Theodor Adorno put forward are a good case in point. In his *Philosophy of Modern Music* (1949), "Glosses on Sibelius," and elsewhere, Adorno portrayed Sibelius as a classic cultural product for the masses, "the ideal of Aunt Jemima's ready-mix for pancakes extended to the field of music." Sibelius, according to Adorno, reinforced the musical status quo, as did the radio broadcasts of Toscanini (who included in his programs a good dose of Sibelius): "the ruined farmer is consoled by the radio-instilled belief that Toscanini is playing for him and for him alone, and that an order of things that allows him to hear Toscanini compensates for low market prices for farm products." In "Glosses on Sibelius," Adorno categorically states that "if Sibelius's music is good music, then all categories by which musical standards can be measured—standards which reach from a master like Bach to the most advanced composers like Schoenberg—must be completely abolished." For Adorno, as a self-ordained theoretician of the "progressive," it was the heroic figure of Arnold Schoenberg who brought the Mosaic tablets with the new laws to direct the practice of all future generations of composers. Any adherence to

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tonality was treason in the light of this new bit of musical history in the making.

Similar thoughts were voiced by René Leibowitz, author of *Schoenberg and His School*. In 1955, Leibowitz composed a two-page "homage" to Sibelius on the occasion of the composer's ninetieth birthday. This short work carried the grateful title of "Sibelius: The Worst Composer in the World." The arguments were Adornian. The marketing of Sibelius had been similar to the flogging of automobiles, cigarettes, and toothpaste. Complaining about the "incorrect" harmony, the monotony of the music, the lack of polyphony, Leibowitz informed us that the impression of originality that Sibelius's works give is due to "ignorance, incompetence and impotence." Furthermore, Sibelius's success is due to a misguided hope that one can make new music with the old means. "The only merit of Sibelius is to show us in magisterial fashion that the old means, which were authentic enough for their times, are false for the present, and that, by using these old means now, nothing is easier than to become the worst composer in the world." Sibelius himself never indulged in such dogmatic anathemas. He studied the early works of Schoenberg under the guidance of Busoni, admired his orchestral craft but admittedly didn't like the sound. He had good words for Stravinsky and Shostakovich, but reserved his highest esteem for the works of Béla Bartók and Alban Berg, "Schoenberg's greatest achievement," as he once put it.

For defenders of Sibelius, the symposium was an occasion to take appreciative note of recent scholarly contributions by one of the participants in the Sibelius symposium—Professor Glenda Dawn Goss of the University of Georgia. Professor Goss has recently published not only an anthology of critical articles by herself and others on Sibelius, *A Sibelius Companion* (Greenwood Press, 1996), but also a major critical overview of the arguments from the pro-Sibelius faction, *Jean Sibelius and Olin Downes: Music, Friendship, Criticism* (Northeastern University Press, 1994). As reigning musical critic first in Boston for sixteen years, then, more importantly, for *The New York Times* from 1924 until well into the Fifties, Olin Downes was the prime ringleader of the pro-Sibelius forces in the United States. He was active also as a broadcast host for radio concerts by the New York Philharmonic, and was a well-known figure in the burgeoning area of "music appreciation" not only with his broadcasts, but also with lectures on the Chautauqua circuit. Professor Goss's study also includes all of the correspondence between this critic and Sibelius himself. As many music-lovers of an earlier generation will recall, Virgil Thomson was the formidable anti-Sibelius figure at *The New York Herald Tribune*. In his first review for the *Trib*, dated October 11, 1940, Thomson carved up Sibelius's Symphony No. 2, finding it "vulgar, self-indulgent, and provincial beyond all description."

From today's perspective, Downes's language praising Sibelius defies belief. For Downes, the music of Sibelius was a matter of manliness against decadence. "There is no more virile music written today," he stated. Sibelius was a "new, clean, great man." The Symphony No. 2 was "gloriously rude"; its composer was an "unwashed Viking." After hearing Sibelius's *En Saga*, Downes confessed that "when I hear this music I avow a carnal desire to discard the soft fat ways of life; to set out in oilskins, or something, for somewhere, to discover at least a desperate polar bear bent on conflict." There is more. Professor Goss also favors us with rich quotations from Downes's excoriations of the avant-garde: Debussy's *La Mer* was composed "by a dreamer lying on his couch in a sumptuously upholstered apartment and puffing blue rings of smoke into the air." Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra* was a work "exceedingly unhealthy and disagreeable, having neither the grandeur of cleansing tragedy nor the uplift of a great composition that makes all men akin." Gosh. With such friends as advocates, who needs en-

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emies? Sibelius never had a chance, buried under Downes's bombast. As a pawn in a bigger game, Sibelius was condemned to be merely popular, but never an object for serious scholarly consideration or musicological research.

Sir Colin Davis and his younger compatriot Sir Simon Rattle represent the latest generation of a long tradition of Sibelius advocates within the United Kingdom which began early in the century with the efforts of Sir Granville Bantock, to be quickly followed by Sir Thomas Beecham, Sir John Barbirolli, Sir Malcolm Sargent, Basil Cameron, and Anthony Collins. And as it was the London Symphony Orchestra that Davis was conducting in these Avery Fisher Hall performances, it is worth remembering that they made the first recordings of *any* symphony by Sibelius, directed by the master's friend and sometime disciple Robert Kajanus, in the early Thirties. Moreover, since Davis released on CD format a set of digital recordings of the complete Sibelius symphonies on BMG/RCA Victor with the same orchestra, the concerts at Avery Fisher Hall seemed somewhat like a coronation for the conductor. There was the fervency of true believers in the audience. The critic from *The New York Times*, Anthony Tommasini, seemed perplexed by the piety of the audience: "That Sibelius has won an ardent following was clear on Sunday afternoon at Avery Fisher Hall. One of the most attentive audiences I have been part of in a long time turned out for the London Symphony Orchestra with Sir Colin Davis conducting, part of a two-week Sibelius festival." How could this be? Tommasini seemed to ask.

There were a few odd touches in programming that should be mentioned. Symphony No. 1 and Symphony No. 6 were missing, even though they had been played during the Sibelius cycle that Davis and the London Symphony had just completed in November at the Barbican Hall in London. Particularly grievous was the absence of the Symphony No. 1, since it was such a bombshell in the year of its first hearing, 1899. Probably only Shostakovich's Symphony No. 1 can be compared as such a stunning announcement of precocity and great things to come.

As soloist in the Violin Concerto, London got the fiery Anne-Sophie Mutter; New York had to make do with Kyoko Takezawa—an estimable player, to be sure, but not in Mutter's league. Although announced, *The Oceanides*—a tone poem first conducted by Sibelius himself in Norfolk, Connecticut, during his only visit to the United States in 1914—was not played. Instead, *The Swan of Tuonela*—a gratingly popular work—was performed. Even more disappointing was the fact that London audiences got to hear a performance of the *Kullervo* Symphony (1892)—a work that Sibelius never permitted to be performed in full during his lifetime. What a coup it would have been to have had *Kullervo* in New York. But New Yorkers had to do without that, as well.

The performances at Avery Fisher conformed more or less to the approach that Davis has taken in his recent digital recordings of these works with the London Symphony Orchestra—which is another way of saying that high tonal sheen, virtuosity, and ponderous pacing were evident throughout. A few fanatics might mention that Davis recorded all the Sibelius symphonies once before, in versions with the Boston Symphony for the Philips label some twenty years ago. These versions are now available on CD at budget prices. For better and for worse, the differences between the old recordings and these new performances, whether live or recorded, were night and day. Where the BSO versions are almost reckless in their impetuosity and sometimes sloppy and uncouth ensemble work, these new versions are stately, with much slower tempi. The primeval fury in the music has been severely diminished, and one has the sense that Davis has gone soft and lost the driving edge that characterized his earlier traversal of the same material. Too often, he seemed uninvolved or quite possibly just

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bored after having had an excessively intense contact with such a monochromatic composer as Sibelius, both in the recording studio and in the concert hall.

To end on a historical note: since 1982, the Sibelius estate has relinquished all dominion over the remaining manuscripts and other papers in its possession. Among the mountain of pages hauled over to the University of Helsinki, there was found the original version (1915) of the Symphony No. 5, painfully revised on one occasion and given another definitive form in 1919. The conductor's score for the primitive version has been lost, but all the orchestral parts are intact. The sensational young Finnish provincial orchestra, the Lahti Symphony Orchestra, under its conductor Osmo Vänskä (b. 1953), has just released a compact disc recording containing both the first and the last version of the Symphony No. 5, on the BIS Label (CD 863). This recording offers us a glimpse into the self-critical side of Sibelius, the composer trying to give form and continuity to melodic fragments, cutting and adding, sometimes simply juggling with elements not quite yet in their definitive order. This struggle was the essence of the sacred game that was the act of composition for Sibelius. As for these astonishing performances both of the early and later versions of the Symphony No. 5, they surge and move forward in a way that offers instructive contrast to the more Brahmsian-Elgarian approach of Sir Colin in his present-day readings of the Sibelius symphonies.

Concert notes

Amistad, by Anthony Davis and Thulani Davis, at the Lyric Opera of Chicago.

In case anyone missed it or was trapped in a cave, December was *Amistad* month. Within less than a week, we saw premieres of a new opera and a Steven Spielberg motion picture based upon the historical tale of the 1839 African slave rebellion on the Spanish slave ship *La Amistad*. For those without newspapers or electricity, *Amistad* relates the story of fifty-two Mendes slaves from Sierra Leone, who mutinied, then sailed to America, where they were imprisoned. Following much behind-the-scenes political and judicial wrangling, and after an argument before the Supreme Court by ex-president John Quincy Adams, the captives were granted their freedom and allowed to return to their homeland.

It would be difficult for any Hollywood depiction touching on racial issues not to seem simplistic or even disingenuous, viewed against the broader, much more complex tapestry of racial unease in the land. Yet, such lapses in Spielberg's film seem minor indeed when set against the catastrophe that is the opera *Amistad*, which had its world premiere at the Lyric Opera of Chicago days before the movie opened. In fact, the P.R. onslaught in Chicago was nearly as extensive for the opera as it was for the film, with symposia, lavish pre-publicity by both major dailies, and educational outreach to "up to 20,000 area schoolchildren."

One would think it almost impossible to create a version of this stirring tale that is completely devoid of passion and intensity, but, miraculously, the composer Anthony Davis and the librettist Thulani Davis (the composer's cousin) have managed to do just that. The opera provides an almost parallel structure to the film, opening aboard the ship and continuing on to the final Supreme Court decision. Unlike the film, however, with its deft pacing of what is an essentially undramatic series of courtroom maneuvers, the opera falls flat. Turgid and devoid of dramatic impetus, the Davises' opera lurches from one stiff and static tableau to another with much wooden speechifying by the characters, the production a kind of panegyric pageant to the slaves' inherent nobility rather than an unfolding of the actual events. Lest we forget the culpability of all white people in this version of the story, John Quincy Adams emerges as morally ambivalent at best, and the recurring chorus of townspeople, Christian abolitionists, and

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journalists wears grotesque, piglike masks, reminiscent of some of the less prepossessing *Wizard of Oz* munchkins.

Amistad is as great a mess structurally as any opera I've ever seen, with the tale of the mutiny and courtroom proceedings continually interrupted by scenes—depicting African deities—that serve no dramatic purpose. With a complete lack of forward momentum or dramatic arc, *Amistad* is a series of disconnected tableaux, each adding nothing to what precedes or follows. Florence Quivar's solo scene as the "Goddess of the Waters" seems to exist for no reason except to give Florence Quivar a star turn, and Thomas Young's repeated appearances as The Trickster—a kind of African deity/Greek chorus providing superfluous commentary on the action—provoked titters from the audience with his insinuating, snakelike body language. As the slave leader, Cinque, the bass Mark S. Doss cut a noble figure with his resonant singing, and Stephen West's fine bass-baritone and considerable stage presence made more than a caricature out of John Quincy Adams.

The lack of theatrical impetus would be less fatal if there were more meat to Anthony Davis's music. Though occasional jazz-tinged passages surface, Davis's score is mostly a pallid and unvaried monochrome of ceaseless counterpoint, lacking even a rudimentary connection to the dramatic events it is presumably depicting. The gray, anticlimactic music for Adams's Supreme Court summation lacks the slightest bit of grandeur or dramatic weight, sounding like John Adams—the composer, not JQA's father—on laudanum. Thulani Davis's repetitive words rarely stray from the banal.

The Lyric Opera gave *Amistad* a first-class mounting, proving the house's reputation yet again as one of the class acts of contemporary operatic production. George C. Wolfe's direction kept the disjointed action moving fluidly with graceful transitions, and Riccardo Hernandez's sets were the opera's most striking element, with the gleaming, varnished courtroom most notable. The conductor Dennis Russell Davies is one of today's most underrated musicians, and the attention and care he lavished on Anthony Davis's score was more than it deserved. Davies elicited characteristically professional excellence from the superb Lyric Opera Orchestra and Chorus.

—*Lawrence A. Johnson*

Capriccio, by Richard Strauss,
at the Metropolitan Opera, New York.

Close on the heels of Jonathan Miller's abysmal updating of Stravinsky's *Rake's Progress* at the Met comes the scarcely less misguided *Capriccio*, set by John Cox in the 1920s. Richard Strauss's fifteenth and last opera, from 1942 when he was seventy-eight, is a summation of the old composer's insights into the making and producing of operas. With a libretto by himself and the conductor Clemens Krauss, the work calls itself "a conversation piece with music." Indeed, its characters debate in a 1775 salon which comes first in opera, the words or the music, as well as related matters.

In her house near Paris, Countess Madeleine entertains the composer Flamand and the poet Olivier who vie for her love; her brother, the Count, a clever philistine with little use for opera except as it supplies singers and dancers for his bed; and the impresario La Roche (an affectionate caricature of Max Reinhardt), the practical man of the theater who sees himself as opera's prime mover, being the only one who knows what the public wants and how to supply it. Also on hand are the diva Clairon (there is to be a rehearsal in the next room), a husband-and-wife Italian operatic duo, and, briefly, a ballerina whom, like the singers, La Roche brings on as party entertainment.

Later we hear from the prompter, who in turn presumes to be the linchpin of the operatic event, and the Countess's servants, who supply the backstairs (or backstage) view: who is carrying on with whom behind the scenes. They also voice the common man's notion of opera as "confusing

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stuff" to which farce and tightrope-walking are to be preferred. The major issue remains the ancient one of *prima le parole* versus *prima la musica*. This is allegorized in Madeleine's inability to choose between the soulful Flamand and the passionate Olivier. The open ending suggests that she will play patroness and muse to both of them, but bedmate to neither, as she steers them toward collaborating on an opera based on the very goings-on in her salon that afternoon—in other words, *Capriccio*.

The text demands the date 1775. Gluck is having his first success with his new form of opera, the relative merits of Rameau and Couperin are argued about, old Goldoni's recent café-table pronouncements on opera are quoted. Clairon, a historical character, is in rehearsal for Voltaire's latest play, there are references to the king and performing at the royal palace, and La Roche describes the typical stage spectacles of the period. Clairon is peeved to be picked up by a mere coach and four instead of six (which the translation emends to "limousine"). The major-domo and his array of lackeys is typically eighteenth-century, as is the contest for precedence between composer and librettist, hardly on today's agenda.

The period is also echoed in the music. Strauss's very overture, scored for string sextet, suggests drawing-room music-making in the *dixhuitième*, and segues into the opening scene where a sextet is playing just offstage. There are musical quotations from Gluck and Couperin (as well as others from Strauss himself) in the score, and passages approximating eighteenth-century recitative. Cox tries to justify the transposition into the Twenties in a casuistic program note that invokes stressing contemporaneity rather than offering a museum piece, and proclaims the Twenties the time closest to our own that still fits the dramatic content. Predictably, the dread words *accessible* and *relevance* are trotted out.

Andrew Davis conducted decently a production that looked schizoid. Mauro Pagano's neoclassical salon with giant frescoes and period furniture was destined for a different staging from the one for which the late Martin Battersby devised Noël Cowardish costumes. The singing ranged from the highly respectable performances of David Kuebler and Simon Keenlyside, as Flamand and Olivier, to the vocally booming but somehow uncompelling work of Jan-Hendrik Rootering as La Roche. Kathryn Harries sang Clairon correctly and piquantly, but was overcostumed and overdirected. Kim Josephson cut a paltry figure as the Count, singing just passably in the least good German. Smaller parts were suitably filled.

As Madeleine, Kiri Te Kanawa looked delectable as always, sang pleasingly, but projected little until the great final scene, the only one in which this spirited but uneven work truly takes off. Her cool presence did not evoke the entrancing *salonnière* till the end. Cox's staging distinguished itself only in making the ballet scene (he added a male dancer) and the Italian couple farcical enough to satisfy the audience of lackeys that surrounded me and was grabbed only by the low comedy.

What may well have kept *Capriccio* out of the Met till now is that this intimate work belongs in a smaller house. Here it seemed miniaturized, the movements of the mind, unlike broad gestures, not traveling well beyond the front rows. The English titles once again failed to make it without the obligatory solecism: so we read ". . . with he playing the lover."

—*John Simon*

Le martyre de Saint Sébastien, by Claude Debussy, at the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles.

In that odd corner of the repertory reserved for acknowledged masterpieces that seldom, if ever, get their due, pride of place is reserved for Claude Debussy's *Le martyre de Saint Sébastien*. In the more than eight decades since the work's Paris debut, *Le martyre* has been vilified, bowdlerized, and, most frequently, plain ignored. Like an ugly

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stepchild, the work is difficult to love. For starters, the score was originally intended to accompany an outré five-hour drama by Gabriele d'Annunzio, the Italian writer who, along with Oscar Wilde, attempted to turn decadence into high art during the last *fin-de-siècle*. D'Annunzio's "mystery play" tells the story of St. Sebastian and metaphorically highlights the tensions between Christianity and paganism. Censured by clerics, secular critics, and the public at large following its premiere, the initial production, which opened at the Théâtre du Châtelet on May 22, 1911, was not without some merit. The choreography was by Michel Fokine—the great Russian-born innovator—the ornate sets and costumes by the gifted Léon Bakst. But it was in casting the title role that d'Annunzio proved especially perverse; he chose the dancer Ida Rubinstein, a Jew and a woman, to play the soldier-saint.

By selecting Debussy to pen a score for this work, the playwright secured *Le martyre*'s immortality. Though d'Annunzio couldn't have realized it at the time, his choice helped to create one of music's most intriguing oddities. (Richard Strauss's *Enoch Arden* and Arnold Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw* can also be placed in this category.) At the same time, it is d'Annunzio's heavy-handed play that has hindered this score from being fully embraced as a musical masterpiece. For better or worse, d'Annunzio's words and Debussy's music are inextricably linked. There have been attempts to extricate Debussy's richly atmospheric music from d'Annunzio's overblown text, but these so-called symphonic fragments do not fully satisfy, as they rob the music of its context. On the other hand, does anyone really want to sit through d'Annunzio's five-hour play? The solution, albeit imperfect, has been compromise: a truncated version of *Le martyre*, running about an hour, that includes all of Debussy's incidental music and only what's necessary from d'Annunzio's play. The result requires a soprano (to sing the Virgin Erigone, the Celestial Voice, and the Voice of Sebastian's Soul), two mezzo-sopranos (singing the Christian twins Mark and Marcellian), a narrator (who occasionally doubles as Sebastian), and a full orchestra and chorus. The material for the singers and orchestra is clear, but what to do about the narration? How much of d'Annunzio's text is to be used, and in what language? French would be ideal, but English, at least in this country, seems more efficacious.

On December 11, 13, and 14, Esa-Pekka Salonen and the Los Angeles Philharmonic attempted to give a performance of *Le martyre* that was both accessible and uplifting. The program began well enough, with a remarkably transparent account of Maurice Ravel's *Le tombeau de Couperin*. Immaculate wind-playing and expertly calibrated string crescendos demonstrated how well suited this orchestra is to impressionist scores. Benjamin Britten's *Les Illuminations*, which followed, was less successful, but this was mostly because the soprano soloist, Sylvia McNair, seemed ill-at-ease with the material, never entirely giving in to the music's more sensual qualities. Yet it was *Le martyre* that proved the least effective component on this bill, defeating yet again the best intentions of those convinced of its merits. To direct this effort, Salonen selected an occasional collaborator and fellow Finn, Juha Hemánus. But Hemánus's hip, semi-staged approach was an uncomfortable fit in the staid confines of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. Embarking on a middle path, Hemánus kept the sung text in French and translated the spoken material into English. His opting for an androgynous narrator, in this case Elaine Tse, hearkened back to Rubinstein and thus borrowed a page from d'Annunzio's book. Unfortunately, the angularity and edge that Tse imparted, although dynamic and engrossing in its own way, seemed oddly out place in an otherwise conventional performance. And Hemánus's decision to place the soprano, once again McNair, away from the other soloists and on a platform in the middle of the orchestra was another misstep. So was the soprano's gown, a billowing bright-white

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affair that resembled nothing so much as a wedding dress.

But there were things to savor here, too. Mezzos Paula Rasmussen and Nancy Maultsby sang very well as the twin martyrs. And the Los Angeles Master Chorale sounded superb, gorgeously united and wonderfully fresh. Sadly, McNair failed to bloom in the upper register and an overall dryness characterized her sound. But Salonen conjured wondrously atmospheric playing from the Philharmonic, conveying the score's rapture without ever sacrificing intensity. Throughout, he masterfully interwove the orchestra's string, wind, and brass choirs, creating an integrated sonic picture. In the end, unfortunately, one couldn't help but feel that *Le martyre* may be a work that functions better in the mind than in the concert hall. Yet something about its twisted religious eroticism continues to cast a spell, allowing those who hear its siren song to hope that at some future date the work will, like its hero, emerge transformed.

—*David Mermelstein*

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The media

"Washington Post" mortem

by James Bowman

December 29. A Monday. In the annual trough of the *entre deux fêtes*, *The Washington Post*, like every other daily paper in the land, obviously hasn't got its starting team on the field. Bob Woodward and Len Downie are enjoying a well-deserved rest, and their otherwise eager pack of bloodhound reporters are all wassailing away with never a thought for the tax reform or child care initiatives that will soon be engaging their full attention. Probably they're not even thinking very much about the trials of Terry Nichols or Ted Kaczynski. So who is in charge? I imagine the editorial night watchman to be a very bright and even more earnest twenty-six-year-old determined to make, as they say, "a difference" —a guy or gal with that special *Washington Post* kind of humorless self-righteousness for whom Mrs. Graham must have to troll the journalism schools with a fine-mesh net every couple of years. He or she could not have had more than a year or two's worth of editorial experience. But just as our natural caution, diminished by the alcoholic relaxation of "the Holidays," often allows the true man (or, of course, woman) to emerge, so in the fatigue of the twilight of the year, with all its stars beclouded, the *Post* was never more itself.

For it is not just your garden-variety, do-gooding liberal who could have made up a front page like this one. It would never occur to Gore Vidal or Victor Navasky to think of such stuff as news (as in "newspaper"), and my guess is that even Ellen Goodman or Frank Rich—even, God help us, Anna Quindlen—would blush to own the news-judgment that put these four (of six) front-page stories above the fold. Reading from left to right we find, first (but not by any means for the first time) that life is hard for welfare mothers: "Trading Textbooks for Jobs: Welfare Changes Force Many to Leave College." Then we catch a glimpse of the hell for women that life in today's army has become: "A Male Prototype for Generals' Protégés: In Choosing Aides de Camp, Army's Leaders Nearly Always Exclude Female Officers." In the top right-hand column, that favorite *Post* source (who never takes a vacation), "Critics," is heard from, as in "US Issuing More Visas to Investors: Critics Say 1990 Statute Opens Path to Citizenship for Wealthy Foreigners." Finally, the top foreign news story of the day is that "For Many Immigrants, Canada's Racial 'Mosaic' Pales at Top."

You might not have heard about it, but the American Society of Newspaper Editors is worried that you don't trust them—the editors, I mean—as much as you used to trust them. So worried are they, indeed, that they have (inevitably) "launched" a two-year study of the subject, and it was in conjunction with this that the same day's *New York Times* reported on a traveling "Committee of Concerned Journalists" who had come to Columbia University to ask

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"Can Journalism Be Impartial?" Journalists, concerned and otherwise, are always asking this question, and always answering with a qualified "yes." It makes them feel good and conscientious and even self-critical. "My God," they think, waking from their self-satisfaction with a start, "can it be that I might really be 'biased' after all?" But then they reflect that, if they were, they wouldn't be asking the question, and so they go back to sleep, comfortable in the conviction, so necessary to their work, that they are not as other men. Their high-mindedness, they are sure, is a prophylactic against bias.

Thus the audience at Columbia heard Louis D. Boccardi, president of the Associated Press, insisting, according to the *Times* report, that he and his colleagues "strive for coverage that aims as much as possible to present the reader with enough information to make up his or her own mind. That's our fine ideal. . . . We strive for coverage that is not distorted by the feelings and biases of the writers and editors—by their ideology, their politics, their religion, their tastes, their personal grudges." In another presentation, Columbia's own James W. Carey, a professor at the Graduate School of Journalism, "made the point that impartiality was not only good for journalism, but good for business. Publishers like Edward Wyllis Scripps and Adolph S. Ochs discovered that well-heeled readers and the advertisers who courted them disliked the noisy, argumentative and distinctly un-impartial style of journalism that flourished under the likes of William Randolph Hearst before the turn of the century."

Yet the *Times* reporter Iver Peterson noted that a dissenting voice had been raised by the late Christopher Lasch in his monograph titled "Journalism, Publicity and the Lost Art of Argument" (1990).

> Information without argument is useless, Mr. Lasch argued, adding that the result was a journalism dominated by advertisers and public relations experts who had no pretense of open-mindedness. "Much of the press, in its eagerness to inform the public, has become a conduit for the equivalent of junk mail," he wrote, delivering "an abundance of useless, indigestible information that nobody wants, most of which ends up as unread waste."
>
> In fact, Mr. Lasch wrote, the volume of information unattached to a point of view has contributed to a decline in readership.

Not too surprisingly, the Concerned Journalists foregathered in New York rejected this contention. The pretense of objectivity is so vital to what they do that the thought of abandoning it in favor of unashamed advocacy must reduce them to gibbering terror. Without it—and the monumental self-importance it promotes in them—they simply couldn't function. Admittedly, their functioning with it produces vast and unreadable tracts of prose which serve little purpose but to advertise their own fine feelings. Naturally, a steady diet of such tendentious claptrap leads to the further diminution of public trust which was the occasion for the appointment of the Concerned Journalists in the first place. But expectations are lowered all around, and where else can readers turn, anyway? Are the electronic media more trustworthy?

Yet there are certain kinds of untrustworthiness that ought to be seen as being particularly closely associated with the modern American newspaper, and these were on unusually clear display in that Monday's *Washington Post*. Take the welfare story, by Robert E. Pierre. Here's how it began:

> Stringent new welfare rules are prompting thousands of college students nationwide to trade their books for low-paying jobs, according to welfare advocates and educators.
>
> Under the law, which Congress passed in 1996, recipients must work or lose their benefits, and college courses that are not considered to lead directly to a job no longer count as work.

Now let's just think about that for a minute. Is it not true that, all across the land, people

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who are not a charge on the public purse manage to work during the day and take college courses in the evening, in order to better themselves (as we used to put it)? Up until 1996, however, welfare recipients had an advantage over these poor slobs. They could take college courses (or not, as they pleased) without having to work to support themselves at the same time. Come welfare reform and all this changes: now the rules are the same for everybody. That, indeed, is the point of welfare reform. But for the *Post*, ever on the lookout for new ways to display its "compassion," the fact that some people who had it easy now have it hard is always an opportunity.

Of course, there are always arguments for seeking out special cases. As Mr. Pierre writes, the ever-useful "critics" are once again coming forward to "charge" that not paying people to go to college is "short-sighted" since the erstwhile welfare dependents "are destroying their long-term chances of self-sufficiency by taking jobs that do not pay enough to support their families, making them more likely to return to the rolls."

The counterargument that this is therefore an excellent reason for them not to have families that they can't support is never made, yet it is at the heart of the rationale for reform. Instead, one Michael Kharfen, a flak for the Department of Health and Human Services, is brought forth to observe in meaningless PR speak that "We're moving away from the traditional training and education model and focusing more on work-related activities. It's about immediate skills that get you to work." In other words, he ignores the point made by those trenchant "critics" completely, leaving the field to them and to the rest of Mr. Pierre's interviewees, all of whom seek to milk our pity for those whose education we used to subsidize and who now must pay their own way.

Mr. Pierre's was an especially interesting story to find in the place of honor on the paper's front page, since only two days earlier we had been promised that the story headed "Children of Welfare Parents Feel Reform's Help, Hurt"—which appeared in the same space—was the "last in a series of occasional articles" on this subject of apparently endless fascination. In that putatively last of the series, Judith Havemann and Barbara Vobejda had put on an impressive display of evenhandedness which ended with the pathetic spectacle of little José Diaz, age eight, of Lawrence, Massachusetts, looking sadly forward to a Nike-less Christmas and turning for comfort to "A Christmas Carol" by his favorite author, Charles Dickens. Maybe it is only because nobody ever reads one of these reports all the way to the end that such blatant manipulation by the reporters, in complicity with José's "dysfunctional" single mom, goes unnoticed.

For what is controversial in *Washington Post* terms is never sentimentality or ostentatious compassion or a bit of obvious fakery like little José's love of Dickens. At the *Post* what became controversial about the series was the fact that a photograph accompanying an article by Katherine Boo on October 19, which was similarly designed to milk all the pathos it could from the situation it described, showed a black teenage mother sucking her thumb. Had the *Post* at last overdone the emotionalism just the tiniest little bit? No! The fact that the girl was black suggested "racism" on the part of the photographer to some on the paper's staff. Few outside the *Post*'s happy family cared, but internally there was outrage. In a typically liberal-minded fudge, the paper's ludicrous "Ombudsman," Geneva Overholser, wrung her hands and acknowledged the justice of the charge that the photo "plays into the most virulently persistent narrow-minded notions: that the face of welfare is black and female." The *Post* should have published it on an inside page. This would have "better served the truth."

One supposes that the racial tension in the *Post*'s newsroom is such that "truth" itself has become a function of what it is possible to say without treading on these extreme racial sensitivities. But about the

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issues important to feminists there is no such controversy. Hence the biggest of the day's front-page stories, another in a series of immensely long pieces by the paper's reporter Dana Priest about women in the armed services. But the story on the twenty-ninth was an especially good example of a non-story on any non-ideological definition of news. Here is Miss Priest's lead:

> When the Army's 10 four-star generals assemble at the Pentagon, they are shadowed by a handpicked group of lieutenant colonels and majors who are almost always in earshot of their bosses, and never out of step. The confident junior officers even look like their graying lords, only 20 years younger.
>
> Like the generals they serve, all but one of the aides is white. And all are men.

She goes on to quote Gen. Johnnie Wilson ("the Army's only African American four-star general") as being told by his colleagues that "we selected the person we felt the most comfortable with." Shock. Horror. Surprise. Wilson himself presumably did the same, since the lone "African-American" among the aides de camp is his own. Yet, not surprisingly, we find that according to Miss Priest, "The post is a strong predictor of success: One-third of the Army's 307 generals were aides early in their careers, and many recall the experience as a source of invaluable contacts and an incomparable first view of the inner workings of military command." Therefore the situation points up "the Army's difficulty in creating a new generation of leaders that includes women, who make up a larger percentage of the service today than at any time in U.S. history."

Now you do not have to be a rabid right-wing reactionary to suppose that the purpose of the U.S. Army is not to provide good jobs for career-minded women but to kill people and blow things up in the cause of the American national interest. Nor is it obscure information that women are less proficient at killing people and blowing things up than men are—just as they are less proficient at playing defensive tackle in the NFL. Does it not therefore follow that, even if we decide to give them every chance to join the killing team, few of them will make it? And if there are few at the lower levels, where the actual killing and blowing up is done, should there not in reason be even fewer at the higher levels, where the killers are commanded?

But Miss Priest, being the good objective reporter she is, does not consider this debate about women's equality in death-dealing to be relevant to the narrow-focus question of making sure, *Post*-style, that where women are at all, there they must be, proportionately to their numbers, in control. By the way, it is interesting to speculate what she would have concluded if she had discovered that every one of those generals had a female aide de camp? Would it be that the army was unexpectedly progressive-minded? Somehow I doubt it. But apart from anything else how surprising is it that men, especially in today's atmosphere of suspicion and accusation, would want someone in such an intimate role to be of the same sex?

Nor is it much more newsworthy that, as the neighboring story informs us, wealthy foreigners with, as William Branigin writes, "a desire to emigrate and cash to spare" are getting green cards for entry into the United States. Apart from anything else, the law which made it possible for them to enter was passed in 1990. But a slight uptick in the number of those taking advantage of it was enough of a peg for the *Post* to hang up, for yet another public exhibition, its celebrated sense of fairness at the very idea that wealth might be buying—as wealth has always bought and always will buy—privilege. It is this factitious outrage which put this on the front page and not the shocking information, also included in the article, that George Bush's brother, Prescott S. Bush, and some former diplomats and congressmen are on the board of a brokerage firm, AIS (formerly American Immigration Services), which has arranged

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visas for at least a thousand of these fat-cat foreigners.

Branigin does note the existence of the argument that foreigners who bring at least half a million dollars of capital into the country, as they are required to do by the law, are providing jobs for American citizens. And that some people consider this to be a Good Thing. But, wouldn't you know it, our old friend "Critics" pops up again to raise a doubt that there is something unsettling about marketing immigrant visas like a commodity: "Although the green cards are 'conditional' for two years under the program, pending verification that the investment has been made and the jobs created, the transaction is viewed by some as only one step removed from selling U.S. citizenship." Critics first said and viewed these things eight years and more ago. That they are still viewing and saying them is what *The Washington Post* considered front-page news on December 29. Perhaps they thought we were worried that Critics might have stopped.

And what about Howard Schneider's three-thousand-word document on Canada, complete with charts and graphs? What earned this exercise in tedium its place on the front page? Presumably, it was Mr. Schneider's creative way of discovering that Canada, just like the United States, suffers from an inadequate supply of "diversity." His lead tells the story of one Denham Jolly, a Jamaican who applied to the regulators of Canadian broadcasting for a license for an FM station featuring Caribbean and "local rap, jazz and world-beat" music. The license went instead to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. It was an eye-opener to Mr. Jolly, and to Mr. Schneider, too, to find "that Canada's cherished official ideal of diversity sometimes has its limits."

Now there's another shocker. As Mr. Schneider puts it,

> In a nation that prides itself on diversity and visualizes its society as a "mosaic" of equal pieces, the distribution of political, social and economic influence is still largely held by those of European heritage. . . . It can be seen in the country's largely white governing institutions—the handful of nonwhite faces, for example, among the 56 recently elected city council members in Toronto, a city some estimate to be more than 40 percent nonwhite.
>
> It can be seen in poverty, wage and job statistics that in some ways mirror those of the United States, with members of so-called visible minorities—people of color—more likely to be out of work, out of school and living in poverty than white Canadians. . . .
>
> It can be seen in the head tables when Canada's elite convene. . . . When the queen took her place among sixteen head-table guests at a state dinner in her honor, the only nonwhite representatives of that mosaic were jazz pianist Oscar Peterson and his wife.

Mr. Schneider goes on to note the increases in recent immigration from India and East Asia which are adding to the estimated 13 percent of Canadians who are nonwhite. "In 1996, the number of non-European immigrants living in Canada surpassed the number of European immigrants for the first time." He adds, ominously: "That is not readily apparent, however, in the country's upper echelons."

It would be interesting to know how long Mr. Schneider really thinks it takes a newly arrived immigrant to ascend to a country's "upper echelons"? Even those sneaky rich foreigners who are buying American green cards at half a million a pop might find themselves hard put to it to make that leap in one year's time. But logic and reason and a common-sense understanding of the way the world works are not what gets you on the front page of *The Washington Post*, and his private views on the matter are (like those of other objective journalists and editors) unrecorded.

He has done all that was required of him in coming up with a new and inventive way of writing the story that the *Post* writes, with varying degrees of originality, almost every day that it publishes. Two days later, for instance, the front-page slot was filled by

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Rachel Alexander, writing about the local hockey team in a piece headed: "Capitals Confront a Different World: Multi-Ethnic NHL Feels the Strains of Diversity." Regrettably, there is no space to rehearse all the fascinating information contained in this article, or even to empathize with the terrors endured by sensitive souls amidst a gang of brawling hockey players at the thought that somebody might one day cast aspersions on their respective racial or ethnic heritages.

Two weeks after this fascinatingly emblematic edition of the *Post*, the indefatigable Mr. Peterson of *The New York Times* wrote an admiring if slightly patronizing piece in his paper's Monday Business section about the *Post*'s success in penetrating local markets and thus turning itself, since the great days of Watergate a quarter-century ago, into "overwhelmingly a suburban paper." He might have added that it is suburban in more than just its circulation. Apart from its thorough if unexciting treatment of politics (the local industry), its coverage of most subjects has a provincial, even a vulgar, cast to it. This is especially true of the arts. Though the addition of Tim Page to its music staff has effected a considerable improvement, it is still very much in character for the *Post* to begin a Style-section piece on the mammoth van Gogh exhibition coming to the National Gallery in October with the Seinfeldian question: "What is it about Vincent van Gogh?"

What indeed! Alas, the reader is left with the distinct impression that neither poor Miss Jo Ann Lewis, who wrote those memorable words, nor her readers will ever know. She gushes about the fifty-seven van Gogh Web sites and the "Top 40 rock song" and the "Oscar-winning movie" about him and goes on to Ruby Green of Spencerville, Maryland, "who recently spent $3 at a yard sale for a flask with a portrait of van Gogh on it." Then, after a few words from Charles Moffett, director of the Phillips Collection, on how both the painting and the life story of the artist are "phenomenal," she proceeds to quote from a local poetess and admirer of van Gogh, one Marguerite Beck-Rex, who reckons that in her verses she herself has captured "the vigor as well as the color" of her hero's paintings. She expects to post some of her poetry on one of the van Gogh Web sites.

In his repentant old age, Ezra Pound reproached his youthful self for the "stupid, suburban prejudice" of anti-Semitism. Nowadays, the suburban prejudices may be less dangerous, but they are no less stupid. Among them we may note such self-satisfied beliefs as that Ms. Beck-Rex and Vincent van Gogh, when they took pen or brush in hand, were doing the same kind of thing. Or that artistic greatness is essentially the same as "popularity." (Miss Lewis noted, with an air of wounded innocence, that Philippe de Montebello of the Metropolitan Museum had given her question as to the reasons for van Gogh's popularity a dusty answer.) Or that "compassionate" social engineers laboring to produce ever more refined models of "diversity" have rendered obsolete such old-fashioned ideas as duty or responsibility or justice or honor. And it is these prejudices to which the suburban sensibility of *The Washington Post* so industriously caters.

Ironically, as the *Post* would no doubt put it, this sensibility goes under the honored name of "liberalism," the better to disguise its fundamentally illiberal purposes. Among these, I take it, is the creation of a new class of ideologues and power-brokers drawn from the ranks of once-despised journalists and academics whose new social and political importance will depend very largely on their ability to make the Progress of Diversity the big story, if not the only story, of our times. It remains to be seen, however, whether or not we are collectively quite stupid enough to believe that.

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Books

Boy meets girl in Montreal

by Mark Steyn

The first time I met Mordecai Richler was through his son Noah, a BBC producer with whom I've worked a couple of times. Richler *fils* had invited me over to the family home in Quebec's Eastern Townships on the day after Christmas, when Richler *père* presides over a vast snooker tournament of family, friends, and locals. As things turned out, I could only manage the lowest score it's possible to get on a snooker table. But then most of the other fellows present were the sort who'd been loafing around pool halls since they were eight: carpenters, plumbers, snowplow operators . . .

In Britain and the Commonwealth, December 26 is known as Boxing Day, so called because it was the day when people would give Christmas boxes of small gifts and gratuities to their servants, local tradesmen, the deserving poor of the parish, etc. Because of the date, I vaguely assumed that Richler was filling his home with blue-collar types and ruddy peasants as some exquisitely condescending act of seasonal seigniorial munificence. After all, one of the most tiresome aspects of literary London is the way writers like Martin Amis and Salman Rushdie—authors whose work is chiefly distinguished for its inability to understand the impulses which motivate the average man—affect a bogus, blokey solidarity with the masses, boring on about how much they love, say, soccer. We all know that Rushdie would last even less time among a terraceful of Millwall fans than at a mullahs' convention in Teheran.

But, with Richler, it isn't a pose. As I subsequently discovered, when he's in the Townships, you can usually find him most afternoons around four at a tavern called the Owl's Nest, perched at the bar, enjoying a couple of scotches and marveling over such signs of the times as Labatt's pioneering lesbian beer ads in the company of the same cheerfully sexist, homophobic farmers and loggers, carpenters, plumbers, and snowplow operators who make up his Boxing Day party. This is the company he prefers to keep. In 1972, after twenty years away, he returned to Quebec because he suddenly realized the only people he knew in London were writers, editors, critics, and directors: total immersion in the world of letters was in danger of drowning his writing. The literary world, he says, is "dull: it's a tradesman's world." So, even in Montreal, he hangs out with lawyers, bankers, and accountants. "They're not as witty, but they're more interesting. It's a richer world."

He's right. And one reason for the pitiful retreat of the English novel—and the comic novel in particular—is that more writers don't see it. If you're holed up in a university or kicking around the media, you eventually run out of anything to write about. One assumes that's the reason why so many novelists end up playing kiddie games with the laws of physics (writing novels that go backwards etc.): the alternative—going out into the world—is too ghastly to contem-

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plate. Eventually, the comic horizons just shrivel away. Even Kingsley Amis by the end wasn't doing much except shuttling between home and the Garrick Club—and, in his last novels, it showed: the only people he knew not of his type were the two Asian fellows who ran the local news agent's (we were neighbors in London). In Richler's comic universe, the ratio of writers to businessmen is about what it is in real life—and in the self-absorbed laager of the modern novel this alone would give him distinction even if he didn't find it hard to take the whole concept of a "writer" seriously. As the young wordsmith in his short story "Some Grist for Mervyn's Mill" (1969) puts it:

> "Nothing really matters. In terms of eternity our lives are shorter than a cigarette puff. Hey," he said. "Hey!" He took out his pen with the built-in flashlight and wrote something in his notebook. "For a writer," he said, "everything is grist to the mill. Nothing is humiliating."

Barney's Version is Richler's first novel since *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, and in the eight years between he has mostly been busy winding up his fellow Quebeckers.[1] For his return to fiction, he's found an eponymous hero who's almost a precise inversion of Richler. They're about the same age—the author is sixty-six, his protagonist three years older—and the contours of their lives are not dissimilar—Paris in the early Fifties, then back to Montreal via London and Hollywood. But, whereas Richler is a lone novelist in his circle of lawyers and plumbers, Barney Panofsky is a cheery philistine in a group of literary talents—make that "literary talents." There's his first wife, Clara, a delicate, if sexually promiscuous, waif to whom he's briefly married in Paris. After her suicide, she finds fame through her posthumously published poems and drawings. *The Virago's Verse Book*, now in its 28th printing, includes a poem dedicated to Barney:

> he peeled my orange and more often me,
> Calibanovitch,
> my keeper.

There's his best friend, Boogie, who, after an excerpt from his work-in-progress appears in the *New American Review*, acquires an indestructible reputation as the author of the greatest American novel yet to be written.

> The longer he resisted cutting a deal with a publisher, the higher the figures flew. Finally Boogie signed with Random House for an advance that ran into six figures, not unusual today, but I'm talking 1958, the year the Canadiens won their third Stanley Cup in a row, taking out the Boston Bruins 5-3 in game five.

And then there's Terry McIver, a giant of the Canadian literary landscape who has decided to publish his diaries, including his account of those far-off days in Paris, when that distinctive McIver style was still being formed:

> P—— still tends to invert many of his sentences, as if they were translated from the Yiddish, as in, "He was a hateful bastard, Clara's doctor," or, after the fact, "Had I known it would have been different, my behavior." I must remember to use this peculiar syntax when writing a Jew's dialogue . . .
>
> Wrote 600 words today and then tore them up. Inadequate. Mediocre. Like me?

Reluctant to be consigned to history as the "P——" of McIver's memoirs, Barney Panofsky determines to set down his own version, "the true story of my wasted life." Wasted? Well, he hasn't written any lowercase poetry or novels-in-progress but he is the head of Totally Unnecessary Productions, which cranks out hugely lucrative schlock for Canadian television. His most reliable money-spinner is the popular

1 *Barney's Version*, by Mordecai Richler; Knopf, 355 pages, $25.

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Mountie adventure series, *McIver of the RCMP*, named for his *bête noir*.

> Whenever a government minister, a free-marketeer responding to American pressure, threatened to dump the law that insisted on (and bankrolled to a yummy degree) so much Canadian-manufactured pollution on our airwaves, I did a quick change in the hypocrite's phone booth, slipping into my Captain Canada mode, and appeared before the committee. "We are defining Canada to Canadians," I told them. "We are this country's memory, its soul, its hypostasis, the last defence against our being overwhelmed by the egregious cultural imperialists to the south of us."

On the other hand, it's the "bonking scenes in canoes and igloos" which have made *McIver* such a hit in the UK and other lucrative markets.

Barney sees himself as a player piano—i.e., he has no music of his own. But, compared to his Plath-like first wife and Brodkeyesque pal, he's a wonderful, rollicking storyteller, a truly creative force whose insights are sharper and more humane than any of the self-proclaimed artists to whom he's content to play Man Friday. The author's structure for these reminiscences is ostensibly unstructured—as disheveled as Barney and, come to that, Richler himself. But the disheveled surface belies a book that's in fact highly (as P. G. Wodehouse would say) sheveled. *Barney's Version* rambles back and forth across the decades, as if it were no more than a taped transcription of random thoughts. But it manages to encompass three wives—Clara; The Second Mrs. Panofsky (never named); and, last but best, Miriam—plus a lovingly uninhibited portrait of Montreal Jewry, snapshots of Hollywood, observations on Quebec separatism and tap-dancing, and general musings on the changing nature of women: "These days," says Barney, "some of them also go in for soya-oil breast implants. You nibble a nipple and what do you get? Salad dressing." You may recognize the style from Richler's notebooks for *The New Criterion*—the accumulation of apparent inconsequentialities. But *Barney's Version* also incorporates a murder mystery—Boogie disappears into a Laurentian lake, and Barney winds up in court—and the almost effortless way this most rigid of genres is folded into what appears to be the most shapeless of books is the surest sign of Richler's technical mastery.

In the same way, the reader's sense that everything in Barney's life is about to swim into focus emerges even as Barney finds his own life swimming out of focus. Small things at first, like not being able to remember the name of that thing you strain spaghetti in, or more than four of the Seven Dwarfs. Just natural absentmindedness, nothing to make a fuss about? Or a telltale sign of something worse? By the time Barney comes to take the test for Alzheimer's, it's the eve of Quebec's 1995 referendum on whether or not to leave Canada.

> "What city are we in?" asks the doctor.
> "Montréal . . ."
> "And the country we're in?"

What a ridiculous question to ask in Quebec. The answer you'd get certainly doesn't depend on whether or not the guy you're talking to has got Alzheimer's. In this one scene, Richler's eye for the absurd and his power to move, profoundly, come together with a peculiar intensity. "It suits me," says Barney early on, "to be rooted in a city that, like me, is diminishing day by day." Mordecai Richler's Montreal is one of the most vivid of literary landscapes, and has been ever since *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. The only problem is it's now far more vivid than the city itself, which increasingly resembles something hit by a strangely selective neutron bomb. Among the vast Anglophone exodus are Richler's own children, gone to richer employment opportunities in London and Toronto. It would seem statistically unlikely that what's left of the English population could ever again produce a writer of Richler's stature. In *Barney's Version*, Barney's predecessors in

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the Richler *oeuvre*—Duddy Kravitz, the Gurskys—are glimpsed at airports and in the background at parties like ghosts lingering for one last look. If it is Richler's fate to be the first and last great Montreal (Anglo) novelist, then he has managed brilliantly in this book to conflate protagonist and place, so that Barney seems to be distilled from the same raucous mélange as the city itself, and his memories now seem as fragile as Canada's once-confident Anglo-Celtic business capital. Je Me Souviens, say the license plates in Quebec. But who will remember for the Anglos? When Richler was a boy growing up on St. Urbain Street, he attended a school named for Viscount Byng, the soldier who commanded the Canadian Corps at Vimy Ridge during the Great War and subsequently became governor-general. Richler's school is long gone, but he's transferred Lord Byng's name to the apartment building in which Barney resides. The Montreal of Richler's youth now exists only in his novels.

It takes considerable adroitness to produce a wildly funny, satiric, virtuoso self-portrait of a man unaware that he's trembling on the brink of the abyss. By the time Barney realizes the truth, and is briefly reunited with his beloved Miriam, Richler has unobtrusively shifted into a tenderness you don't associate with him. He's only a few years from his three-score-and-ten, but satiric novelists don't usually age well. As they grow old, comics on the stage retreat into pandering, comics on the page retreat into crankiness: observation dwindles into obsession, drollness into biliousness. It's happened with Kingsley Amis, Tom Sharpe and many others—a kind of comedic Alzheimer's, in which the timing stumbles and trips and can't get up again. Not with Richler. He can get at the idiocies of the modern world, but you don't feel they're eating him up. Thus, Barney goes off to Hollywood to pitch an idea to one of the town's teenage moguls:

> "But, lo and behold," I went on to say, "the ship docks safely in New York, where the innocent kid is met by a sexy reporter, a Lauren Bacall type, who—
>
> "Lauren Bacall," he said. "You've got to be kidding, unless she's playing somebody's mother."

Maybe that's the gift bequeathed to him by his native province. In Canada, Richler is routinely described as "irascible," but that's only in Canadian terms, where the snow lasts six months but the suffocating blandness is year round. You couldn't stick it out in Quebec if you weren't a wag. On the night of that 1995 referendum, the premier, Jacques Parizeau, blamed the narrow defeat on what he called "ethnics"—i.e., non-Francophones—prompting Richler to set up the Prix Parizeau, a literary award for the best writing by Quebec ethnics, or *les autres*, as the separatists say. Gilles Rheaume, another more ferocious separatist, immediately reported Richler to the province's Human Rights Commission, demanding that they prosecute him for racism. Eventually, the Commission sent him a long document explaining why they'd decided not to go ahead with the prosecution. He's had it framed, so it can hang on the wall with the Governor-General's Literary Award and his invitation to Buckingham Palace. What writer worth his salt wouldn't thrive in such an environment? In *Barney's Version*, someone quotes Hugh MacLennan on the perennial dilemma of the Canuck writer: "Boy meets girl in Winnipeg. Who cares?" But thanks to a weird combination of a stubborn writer and a demented environment, boy meets girl in Montreal: *we* care.

Plato, true & false

John M. Cooper, editor Plato: Complete Works. Hackett, 1,848 pages, $42.50

reviewed by Seth Benardete

To have everything of Plato in one volume, regardless of whether or not it has been ascribed to him correctly, is a fortunate

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event: one can survey all at once the man himself and his history, what he certainly wrote and what others foisted on him as well as what at different times, both in the past and at the present, has been denied to be his. In the so-called Thrasyllan edition, there are thirty-six genuine pieces, arranged in nine tetralogies.

The editor of the present edition, which contains translations by several hands, is John M. Cooper, who teaches philosophy at Princeton University. Cooper puts an asterisk against six of the Thrasyllan dialogues, which he says are generally agreed not to be Plato's, a dagger against two others, whose authorship is still disputed, and a double dagger against the thirteen letters, some of which are thought now to be genuine. The asterisk is also put against eight others that were not part of the Thrasyllan corpus. There are, then, twenty-seven dialogues with which the reader can confidently begin. But how to begin? There were in antiquity various proposals designed to show the way to begin the reading of Plato; but, as they were all geared to a neo-Platonic orthodoxy, they are, despite their apparent plausibility, unsuitable for a contemporary beginner who is not grounded in any school.

Plato hides himself behind his characters, and in this sense his dramas are more like Greek tragedies than comedies, for the tragic poet never appears and lets the action stand in for his thought. Socrates, however, is the main speaker in twenty of the dialogues, and the instigator of five others. He is Plato's representation of the philosopher, through whom we are meant to understand what philosophy is. Plato has thus given us a riddle: the universality of a way of thinking is concentrated into an individual, whose eccentricities, both of an outward and inward kind, resist any attempt at universalization. The essential anonymity of mind should, we are led to believe, be embodied in the stranger, who is always at home in his homelessness. "The other" is, according to Diotima in the *Symposium*, Eros, and Eros appears to take on his human form in Socrates; but in this form Eros is completely at home in Athens and never the stranger.

It is unfortunate that both Nicholas P. White and C. J. Rowe, the translators respectively of the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, whose main speaker is a stranger and is addressed throughout as such, chose to turn him into a "Visitor," and change the vocative "Oh Stranger" into "Sir," and also that Trevor J. Saunders, the translator of the *Laws*, whose main speaker is again a stranger, chose to label him "Athenian," and again have him addressed as "Sir." In suppressing the alien in the stranger, the translators have put an unnecessary block in the way of our confronting directly the radical difference between two versions of what the philosopher is, one of whom presumably comes closer to being the philosopher while appearing to be as far away from the other as possible.

If we start with the puzzle of the apparent conflation of the universal and the particular in Socrates and the self-evidence of their separation, we have before us in a Platonic fiction the mystery of the so-called Platonic Forms or Ideas. According to this theory, particulars are said to participate in the universal Forms but always fall short of realizing them fully. The incarnation of the fully real in Socrates is radically defective. An elementary reflection, then, on the vividly brought-to-life Socrates—all of whose features, from his bulging eyes and swaggering gait to his comprehensive irony, carry universal implications—seems to lead at once to the most metaphysical of questions. The ease with which this can be done forces one to pull back, and question whether one must not start from the one point in the real that Plato could not make up, though it naturally lent itself to symbolic representation: the trial and death of Socrates.

Apart from his death, "Socrates" could just as well be "Nobody," and the name no more than a rigid designator for whatever speeches Plato wanted to assign to it. The

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problem of appearance and self-identity seems once more to be tied in with that series of events in which Socrates finally turns into a corpse and ceases to be who he is, for as he says on that occasion, "I am this Socrates, the one who is now conversing and putting in order each of the things being said." The first indication we have, then, of how to arrange the dialogues is to put together the seven dialogues which revolve around Socrates' trial and death. These seven include some that are held to belong to Plato's earliest and latest stages of his life. He was always thinking, it seems, about the meaning of the last days of Socrates. The temporal sequence of the dialogues is: *Theaetetus*, *Euthyphro*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Apology of Socrates*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*.

The *Theaetetus* raises the question, What is wisdom or knowledge? and the *Euthyphro* puts this question in its pre-philosophic form, What is piety? Both of these dialogues end in failure: neither philosophy nor non-philosophy has an answer. The next two dialogues are meant to answer a three-part question Socrates puts to a stranger who was trained in the school of Parmenides. The philosophy of the One is to explain whether sophist, statesman, and philosopher are one, two, or three. The stranger says that they are three, but Plato decides to give us only two of them, and thus seems to imply that the third, the missing *Philosopher*, is to be found in the *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*. We are, then, back where we started, for Socrates was the riddle and not the answer.

This constellation of seven dialogues is not the only ordered set in the Platonic galaxy. The pair of the first magnitude are the *Republic* and *Laws*, the first of which deals with the nature of the political and the best political order, and the second of which handles simultaneously the principles of law in general and the structure of the best lawful regime. Each of these has its own prelude, which though now regarded as spurious does put a frame around the issues with which the major works deal. The *Clitophon* prefaces the *Republic*; it is a vehement denunciation of the know-nothing Socrates, who exhorts everyone to start on the road to virtue but then stands squarely in the way of the converted. The *Minos* prefaces the *Laws* and has Socrates declare, "The law wants to be the discovery of what is." Malcolm Schofield, the translator of the *Minos* in this volume, garbles it: "Then ideally law is discovery of reality."

Be that as it may, the *Republic* brings in its train the *Timaeus*, which begins with a summary by Socrates of what appears to be a fragment of the *Republic* (from Book II to the middle of Book V) and ends with a construction of a universe in which the citizen of Socrates' best city could have his home. The *Timaeus* is followed by the unfinished *Critias*, which was to tell the story of the preexistence of Socrates' city in Athens' distant past. These three dialogues were to be completed by a missing fourth: *Hermocrates*, based on the Syracusan general who defeated the Athenian invasion force in a decisive engagement of the Peloponnesian War, was to round out the program Socrates set. Once more, then, we are given the suggestion of completion only to be disappointed. Does the solution to the enigma of Socrates always end in another enigma?

On at least one occasion, Plato completed a square. The two forms that public sophistry can take, rhetoric and sophistry proper, are dealt with in the *Gorgias* and *Protagoras* respectively. And the two forms in which eros shows itself, either in the speech the lover makes to the beloved or in the experience of the lover in himself, appear in two separate dialogues, the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. It is clear that Socrates, with his double erotic art, is meant to stand in opposition to both the sophistry of Protagoras and the rhetoric of Gorgias, and that even a reformed Gorgianic rhetoric, with justice and punishment at its core, should have nothing to do with either lover or beloved. Since, however, justice and eros are either in conflict through the law or experientially intertwined in jealousy, the

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Socratic claim to an unencumbered eros involves him in a dispute with either the political version of eros, the tyrant—whose basest form is the rock-star—or its poetical understanding in comedy and tragedy. It is for this reason that all the characters in the *Protagoras* reappear in the *Symposium* but have to be supplemented by Aristophanes.

The square, then, that these four dialogues form can be attached to another set of political dialogues, for in the *Gorgias* Socrates makes rhetoric out to be the phantom image of justice and thus all but invites us to think of the *Republic* as the place where the reality of justice is to be found, and he likewise makes sophistry out to be the phantom image of the art of legislation, which points in turn to the *Laws* as its reality. Two constellations, then, are thereby connected, and though there is only one dialogue, the *Theaetetus*, that explicitly gets linked with two others, it seems that a tentative road map can be drawn elsewhere to guide us in our reading. The diacritical and syncritical ways of Socratic dialectic are thus at work in the parting and pairing to which the collection of Platonic dialogues, large and small, regular and irregular, is itself subject.

Each Platonic dialogue seems both to stand on its own and to declare its dependence on others. The *Republic* is concerned with a single virtue, justice. It therefore has to be put together with those dialogues that deal with the three other classical virtues. The *Charmides* handles moderation or σωφροσύνη, self-knowledge and self-control, and echoes Socrates' definition of justice in the *Republic*—it is to mind one's own business—placed in the mouth of the future tyrant Critias, who seems to find in Socrates' definition a free pass to complete tyranny. It is to be stressed, though, that however close moderation and justice come together they are still apart, for in the *Charmides* moderation is never called a virtue. The *Laches* handles courage and is as ostensibly aporetic as the *Charmides*.

Why should justice gain a definition but the other virtues in which Socrates' guardians are trained fail to obtain a final form when they are treated apart? At the end of the *Statesman*, the stranger suggests that their unity is only in philosophy. What, then, of the fourth virtue, wisdom? Why does Plato once again fail to complete the square? What do these missing fourths stand for? The unfinishability of philosophy and the ultimately insoluble questions? The *Republic* is concerned with justice in its double form—the right order of the soul and the right order of society. It therefore calls attention to what it does not handle, the pattern of right and the experience of right. The relation between the pattern of right—what is called poetic justice—and the experience of right is the theme of tragic poetry, where the satisfaction its plot may bring is at odds with the terror the exaction of right induces. Tragic poetry is accordingly a central theme of Plato, for the pattern of right belongs to the image the poet makes while the experience of right carries with it all the conviction of the real.

We are forced to wonder whether Plato himself as the master poet has not reproduced something of this kind philosophically. Is there a philosophic experience that accompanies a philosophic argument that escapes being written and yet is still an argument? Is going through an argument, with an awareness of all its slips and slides, merely the first step to the understanding of the argument? Is the conclusion of an argument just as unsatisfactory by itself as the disappearance of Oedipus at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus* if one cannot see in it his double crime and bind together three things: his poking his own way to death without a guide, the condition of his bound feet when he was exposed as an infant, and his solution to the riddle of the Sphinx? Oedipus's final moment collapses his life in time.

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates makes two epideictic speeches. The first faults the lover, the second praises him. Socrates later says that these two speeches are one. He urges us, against the self-evident differences of the

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two speeches, which we have read in order, taken each by itself, to view them in their bilateral symmetry as capable of being mapped onto one another in such a way that they become one.

At the center of the *Phaedrus* is the famous image of the soul as the union of a noble white horse and obstreperous black horse driven by a charioteer. The obvious morality of Socrates' first speech is represented by the right hand and thus equivalent to the noble white horse of the second speech; the left hand is equivalent to the black horse in the second. Though the right hand cannot be made congruent with the left by any spatial transformation, we are asked to find a way in thought to smuggle the first speech into the second such that the structure of the soul with its three or four parts does not stand at odds with the principle of soul as self-motion. It seems essential that this is to be done despite the obvious difficulty that it would entail the dissolution of the difference between human and divine madness upon which Socrates' whole argument seems to turn. What encourages us to consider the recommendation as not sheer playfulness is that the ill-shaped and unmanageable black horse has the snub nose of Socrates. Inasmuch as the *Phaedrus* is the only writing of Plato that deals with writing, it would seem to follow that Socrates' injunction to us in that dialogue stands for a universal exhortation to undertake our own moral transformation. Now, in this single volume the Greek-less reader has everything he needs in order to begin the fulfillment of this not unpleasant task.

An elusive acquaintance

Claire Tomalin Jane Austen: A Life. Knopf, 341 pages, $27.50

reviewed by Brooke Allen

It seems that the Jane Austen boom that began a few years ago has not yet run its course: its latest manifestation is an absorbing new biography by the British biographer Claire Tomalin. A mere three hundred pages, written with spare elegance and grace, *Jane Austen: A Life* is a welcome throwback to a time when biographers did not feel it necessary to stuff their tomes with every dull and unnecessary detail of their subjects' lives. Tomalin, who has also written books on Mary Wollstonecraft; Katherine Mansfield; Dickens's mistress Nelly Ternan; and Dora Jordan, the nineteenth-century actress who lived with the future William IV and bore him ten children, displays a novelist's instinct for significant detail and a knack for compelling narrative. She makes fascinating reading of Austen's forty-one uneventful years and brings real substance to the shadowy figure who left behind no diary, no clear portrait, and all too few letters.

Jane Austen has too often been seen as a freak talent, a lone genius flowering in philistine surroundings. Tomalin takes a different approach: she places Austen squarely within her family and demonstrates that, far from having been a unconventional or exotic member of that family, she was entirely in sympathy with its ethos and aesthetic—the most brilliant member of a strong, ambitious, intelligent, and self-sufficient tribe.

Born in 1775, Jane was the seventh of the eight children of George Austen, a Hampshire clergyman, and his wife, Cassandra. The Austens were a robust family, with all eight children surviving childhood, a remarkable record for those times, although the second son suffered from some severe defect, possibly cerebral palsy. The Reverend Austen and his wife were unsentimental people who discouraged weakness, either physical, moral, or emotional. They were early proponents of tough love: when each of their children reached the age of three or four months they banished it to the home of a wet nurse in the village, to be cared for away from the family until it reached the age of about two.

However our sensibilities might recoil

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from this treatment, the fact stands that the Austen children grew up to be self-confident and mentally healthy adults, and that the family as a whole remained unusually close. Tomalin posits that Jane, however, demonstrated throughout her life a certain emotional distance and brittleness. Reading her letters, Tomalin maintains, "You are aware of the inner creature, deeply responsive and alive, but mostly you are faced with the hard shell; and sometimes a claw is put out, and a sharp nip is given to whatever offends. They are the letters of someone who does not open her heart."

"The Austens cared about goodness, but they also cared deeply about success." Tomalin characterizes them as classic meritocrats, and for the Austens as for the Watsons in the novel fragment of that name, "The Luck of one member of a Family is Luck to all." When rich but childless friends, the Knights, made known their wish to adopt Jane's brother Edward, his parents never allowed sentiment to get in the way of their concern for his future: they agreed to the adoption, though happily the boy would remain all his life very much a part of the Austen family. Other brothers, too, were fortunate: the charming but unreliable Henry lived high on the hog for years as a banker, although his business eventually crashed and he was forced at the age of forty-five to take orders as a lowly curate. The steadier Francis, who joined the Royal Navy at the age of fourteen, took canny advantage of the new opportunities opened to merit and talent by the exigencies of the Napoleonic Wars, working his way steadily upward to end his career as Admiral of the Fleet.

For women, the path to success was a rich husband, but neither Jane nor her sister Cassandra proved willing in the end to purchase freedom, wealth, or status at the price of a loveless marriage. Jane surely shared the feeling exhibited by Elizabeth Bennet in observing the humiliations of Charlotte Collins's domestic life, that marriage can too often be a form of prostitution. The only young man she is known to have loved, Tom Lefroy, had a family dependent on his ability to win a rich wife, and he was briskly hustled away when he showed signs of attachment to the portionless Jane Austen. A few years later Jane received a proposal from an old family connection, Harris Bigg-Wither. Bigg-Wither, younger than she by several years, was the brother of two of her dearest friends, the possessor of a fortune and the heir to considerable estates. Jane immediately accepted his proposal:

> Jane would now become the future mistress of a large Hampshire house and estate, only a few miles from her birthplace, and close to her brother James. She would be almost as grand as Elizabeth Austen [her brother Edward's wife] at Godmersham. She would be able to ensure the comfort of her parents to the end of their days, and give a home to Cassandra. She would probably be in a position to help her brothers in their careers. She would be surrounded by dear sisters-in-law and friends. She would be a kindly mistress to the estate workers. She would have children of her own. All these thoughts must have rushed through her head, each one like a miracle, offerings of happiness she had given up expecting.

The temptations must have been almost overpowering. Yet the next morning she sought out Harris and told him with consternation she had decided that she could not, in fact, become his wife. After that, she seems, like her sister, to have ceased to think of marriage, to accept a future in which she would be utterly dependent on her family's uncertain fortunes, made especially uncertain by the Church of England's policy of providing no pensions for widows and children of the clergy.

It is marvelously refreshing these days to read a serious study of a woman novelist in which there is not to be found a single instance of the words "gender" or "patriarchy," or any other contemporary intellectual jargon for that matter. Yet in *Jane Austen*, as in her other biographies, Tomalin makes the reader acutely sensitive to the position of

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women during the nineteenth century. Until she began at the age of thirty-eight to earn a modest amount from her novels, Jane Austen had no personal income whatever, and was accordingly constrained to live a life that was always subordinated to the needs and whims of more powerful family members. For example, the choice of where they should live was entirely up to the senior Austens, and not their adult daughters; hence when her parents decided to leave Steventon rectory, the home Jane loved, she had no choice but to accompany them on their subsequent peregrinations through Bath and other spots that Jane found uncongenial: a way of life that lasted ten years and was so hateful and unsettling to her that her vigorous writing career came to a halt and did not revive itself until the Austen women finally settled in Chawton cottage after George Austen's death.

Jane Austen's personal freedom was limited to a degree that modern women of her social class would find both incredible and insupportable. It was out of the question, for instance, that she travel alone, not that she had any money with which to do so. Even riding was *verboten*, which made the simple act of getting out of the house in winter a challenge: Jane wrote of the "female foot" with its inadequate cover, unequal to mud, snow, and rain. Village society was homogenous to a degree we can scarcely imagine nowadays: "each cottage was entirely familiar and each face known; any stranger caused a stir, the odd pedlar, or a sailor making his way home across country."

Jane, like Cassandra, was expected to find an adequate vocation in the roles of daughter, sister, and aunt. Her mother was a lifelong hypochondriac who demanded constant attention (although like many such she survived to a ripe age, outliving Jane herself). Her many sisters-in-law had numerous children, and dependable Aunt Jane was on permanent call to attend births, to care for older children whose mothers were busy with new infants, and all too often to comfort and nurture these same nieces and nephews when their mothers died in childbirth. It is to her credit that she was remembered by the Austen progeny as a charming, high-spirited, and generous member of the family. If, in her heart, her writing sometimes took precedence over their care and entertainment, they were never allowed to suspect it.

While it is true that Jane Austen must often have resented the seemingly endless family obligations that kept her from her work, it must also be remembered that she was in profound sympathy with most of her family; they shared her tastes, prejudices, interests, and most of all her sense of humor. Her brother James, a clergyman, wrote accomplished and sophisticated poetry; Henry was an acknowledged wit; Cassandra, though not a writer herself, was the ideal reader and audience. Jane's nieces Anna Lefroy and Fanny Knight were spirited and original girls. Even the mother whose imaginary ailments were such a trial was also a sharp, congenial companion who took pleasure in writing wonderfully clever light verse for the amusement of her children.

> I send you here a list of all
> The company who graced the ball
> Last Thursday night at Basingstoke;
> There were but six and thirty folk,
> Altho' the Evening was so fine.
> First then, the couple from the Vine;
> Next, Squire Hicks and his fair spouse—
> They came from Mr. Bramston's house,
> With Madam and her maiden Sister;
> (Had she been absent, who'd have
> missed her?).

Jane, it seems, did not come by her wicked wit unnaturally.

While it cannot reasonably be claimed that Jane Austen had an unhappy life, it was a life that contained, perhaps, more than its share of disappointments. Spirited and sunny as they are, her novels frequently reflect this fact. As an astute Victorian novelist, Julia Kavanagh, wrote about Austen, "If we look into the shrewdness and quiet

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satire of her stories, we shall find a much keener sense of disappointment than joy fulfilled. Sometimes we find more than disappointment." Yet Austen accepted that disappointment with the stoicism and tough humor that her family had always endorsed. As a result she has traditionally been an impressive, moving figure but rather an intangible one. In Tomalin's words,

> She made no claims for herself, for a room of her own, for a place among the English novelists; even her appearance, as we have seen, is hard to visualise at all precisely. The family march towards us, brightly lit in their uniforms or sober in clerical black, surrounded by their children, worrying about wills, installed in fine houses; she is as elusive as a cloud in the night sky.

As Lord David Cecil put it, Jane Austen remains "as no doubt she would have wished—not an intimate but an acquaintance." Yet it must be said that in this intelligent biography Claire Tomalin has succeeded in bringing her a little closer to us, and a little more clearly into focus.

"Our saint–if we had one"

Bonnie Costello, editor, with
Celeste Goodridge and Cristanne Miller
The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore. Knopf, 597 pages, $35

reviewed by David Yezzi

With this selection of the letters of Marianne Moore (1887–1972), Bonnie Costello and her collaborators have winnowed to one volume the poet's extensive correspondence of some thirty thousand surviving missives. Though she wrote fewer than George Bernard Shaw, who by his editor's estimate dashed off in the neighborhood of two hundred and fifty thousand communiqués, the number and general length of Moore's letters will impress many a present-day litterateur whose own correspondence might comprise, at best, a slim edition of collected emails. Beginning here in 1905, when Moore was attending Bryn Mawr College, the volume extends to 1969, the year of her disabling stroke (and three years before her death in New York City). Moore's dispatches contain her almost daily—and often more than thrice-daily—concourse with a world that she both delighted in and, to a fair extent, retreated from, favoring instead the genial privacy of life with her mother, for whom she was a perennial companion.

While Moore became during her lifetime a much-loved public figure, as a poet she continues to suffer from what might be called, in the parlance of public relations firms, an image problem. Though by no means as damaging as the infamy that beset Moore's champion and good friend Ezra Pound, Moore's late fame as a baseball-loving, zoo-going magazine personality and a correspondent of the Ford Motor Company has taken its toll on the poetry in a way that her work is particularly susceptible to. Her poems' almost preternatural personal reserve, linguistic playfulness, wit, and satiric distance—accompanied by promiscuous quotation, baroque detail, prosodic invention, and Moore's particular brand of ingenious slant rhyme—all run the risk of overriding their deep-rooted seriousness and emotional complexity. Perhaps because of the poetry's difficult idiosyncrasies, readers have too easily chalked it all up to the musings of the eccentric in a tricorn hat famously pictured on the cover of *Esquire* in June of 1966.

Moore's life and poetry, in this regard, represent a double irony: remembered as a darling of the media, she was in fact an extremely private individual possessed of a bedrock sense of moral responsibility; often criticized for its remoteness from experience, her poetry is situated on the front lines of human struggle. Taking aim at the verse in 1984, the poet and novelist Gilbert Sorrentino leveled this heavy barrage: "[Her] language failed her because it lost any touch with the reality that language

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bears. Miss Moore retreated from life; and her language retreated with her, until it finally died, it finally became good copy, bright and slick and incapable of carrying emotion to the page, to the reader." He attributes this paucity of experience to the poet's famous fascination with obscure animals and other natural curiosities: "Miss Moore cast about for subject matter outside her human terrors and desire and meanness—outside, that is, her own humanity, much like a classy Ogden Nash." Ogden Nash is brandished in this context, much the way the infamous Ambrose "Namby-Pamby" Philips sometimes is, as a synonym for empty versification that "classy" in no way redeems. Sorrentino likens Moore's poetic fauna to creatures out of Walt Disney.

The best defense against this woeful misreading of the poetry was made proleptically by T. S. Eliot in his introduction to Moore's *Selected Poems* in 1935:

> It would be difficult to say what is the "subject matter" of [Moore's great poem] "The Jerboa." For a mind of such agility, and for a sensibility so reticent, the minor subject, such as a pleasant little sand-coloured skipping animal, may be the best release for the major emotions. Only the pedantic literalist could consider the subject-matter to be trivial; the triviality is in himself. We have to choose whatever subject-matter allows us the most powerful and most secret release; and that is a personal affair.

That Moore's poetry was a "personal affair" of great consequence to her that also managed great universality becomes clear in her correspondence. When in 1920 two poems by Moore appeared in *The Dial*, John Warner Moore, the poet's only sibling and most frequent pen pal, wrote to her: "I was . . . greatly impressed with the fundamental grasp of 'Life' in [the poems] and expressed too in our own special 'language' but so marvelously handled that the 'aliens' could and can understand them & enjoy them." Moore's "deference to common creatureliness," as the critic S. P. Zitner put it, appears everywhere in her letters. Circular missives among Moore, her brother, and her mother carried appellations derived from *The Wind in the Willows*, such as Badger, Mole, and Rat. To her friend Bryher, Moore became Dactyl, shortened from pterodactyl. One of the poems from that *Dial* of 1920, "Picking and Choosing," ends with this apostrophe to a diminutive canine:

> Small dog, going over the lawn nipping
> the linen and saying
> that you have a badger—remember
> Xenophon;
> only rudimentary behavior is necessary to put
> us on the scent.
> "A right good salvo of barks," a few strong
> wrinkles puckering the skin between
> the ears, is all we ask.

It is through the "rudimentary behavior" of her animals, plants, and curios that Moore puts us on the scent of her true subject matter. While the sheer variety and, in Moore's prized word, "gusto" of her descriptions give pleasure, her poems take the reader beyond their ornate surfaces, to qualities that are not necessarily human but that suggest standards for and reveal foibles in the human condition. Her animals are not stand-ins for people, but their attributes and excellences can be compared fruitfully with our own.

One disappointing aspect of the letters is that they do not deal more with the poetry. Moore often comments on the work of colleagues such as William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and her good friend Elizabeth Bishop. But such remarks are usually brief, and either too specific or too general to shed much light on Moore's views of poetry, her own or others'. She writes of Stevens's poetry in the most admiring terms, but never at any length. (That she championed Stevens at a time when others, even Pound, dismissed his poetry or passed over it in silence is the single greatest testament to the fineness of her critical

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judgment.) Only Allen Ginsberg comes up for sustained, albeit riotously negative, appraisal. As a partial consolation, Moore's elaborate descriptions of arcane animals and objects—often presented to her as gifts—can feel like preliminary sketches for poems, as this one for "The Jerboa" couched in the description of a trip to the screening of a nature film:

> A rather amusing thing was the collection of animals and imitation cocoa-fiber at the mouth of the theater, round the ticket-booth—a kodiak bear on its hind legs, that kept nodding, and a nodding mustard yellow tiger with a cotton stockinet snake with red spots; about the size of two garden hoses looped careless round the body several times. They certainly did need a Pharaoh's rat (rusty mongoose) in that jungle. The mongoose I might say, is the ichneumon; or rather, the rusty-backed Egyptian mongoose is called an ichneumon. I have been studying this up.

Far from the stuffed simulacra of Disneyland zoology, Moore's scientific rigor with regard to the natural world has real teeth to it, and it was through her writing that she made her boldest expeditions.

Throughout Moore's adult life, her engagement with the world, as these letters amply attest, was active to be sure; there were parties, art galleries, the Natural History Museum, Lincoln Kirstein's invitations to the ballet, the literary whirl of Greenwich Village, baseball and boxing with George Plimpton, Stevens reading his poetry at the Y, and a trip to the circus with Bishop. Formerly a teacher and a librarian, Moore assumed editorship of *The Dial* in 1925, a position she held until the magazine's final number in July 1929. Even so, her move in that year to 260 Cumberland Street in Brooklyn interposed between herself and the friends and activities in Manhattan what she occasionally referred to later as an insurmountable journey. By the late Thirties, as Costello tells us, "Moore became increasingly aware of her mother's frailty and spent more time nursing or watching out for her. The seclusion and quiet they had welcomed in Brooklyn when they first arrived had become a necessity, as Mrs. Moore entered the last decade of her life." Moore traveled little, beyond a postgraduate tour with her mother to England, Scotland, and France, a visit to Greece, and shorter trips to see family and friends in such places as Washington State, California, Virginia, and Maine. In a letter to her great friend William Carlos Williams, Moore characterized her relative isolation: "It is surely a kind of blasphemy as well as beggary, for anyone to live as I do like a squirrel in a squirrel-wheel, away from my natural associates but their books and other books—and house cleaning (don't laugh)—are miraculous, don't you think, in maintaining an illusion of vividness."

Then there were bouts of illness, worst when both Moore and her mother succumbed at once:

> On the door is a surly notice in red crayon—"Do Not RING or *Knock*. Leave package or other thing *inside apartment door*." We let the telephone ring. (Could even Socrates have mustered equanimity to do that!) We pay no attention when a delegate from a charitable organization—or a bill-collecting milkman—does ring the bell. We are rationed as to letter-writing, and dark threats are concentrated on us when, say, three notes lie waiting in the hallway to be mailed.

The characteristic wit and fortitude of this passage seem strained, however, in Moore's letter seven months later to Elizabeth Bishop: "Not a soul have I seen or been to see—all these months—but someday I shall be natural again. See if I'm not." Money was also a concern over the years. Following Moore's tenure at the *The Dial*, during which time she had written prose but published no poetry, Moore left off full-time employment to devote herself to her writing. Her brother, Warner, a chaplain in the Navy, provided the poet and her mother with money each month to cover expenses. Assistance arrived, too, from abroad. Bryher

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(Winifred Ellerman), a British poet and novelist and common friend of Moore's and H.D.'s, helped Moore from time to time. A letter from Moore to Bryher in 1933 hearkens back to a baldness of personal disclosure seldom exhibited in the correspondence beyond Moore's college years:

> What matchless friendship, for you to think toward us and invite us to open our hearts in distress. And better even than having you give to us if we were in perplexity, is knowing that we have a friend that we could turn to without shame or the sense of desperation. We did lose most of my earnings, but have the greater part of my income we had before I went to *The Dial*, and Warner was so outraged at the thought of our losses that he is almost unbalanced in his determination to make it up to us; giving us for instance a Navy allotment that more than covers our rent, paying our telephone-bill, and subscribing to *The Times* for us.

What strikes the reader about such passages is not their frequency (they were, in fact, rare) but the break they represent with Moore's otherwise tight-lipped decorum in her letters, a carefully woven fabric of the finest sentiments—perfect in their generosity of spirit and thoughtful regard for others—but for an occasional fraying. The letters are rife with what Moore herself called, referring to the works of La Fontaine, "a surgical kind of courtesy." Moore's admissions of need must have struck her friends like thunderbolts, coming as they did from someone usually so poised and lively. The way in which Moore's letters reveal personal struggle recalls the way that such struggles are revealed in her poems: through restraint. Despite the hardships Moore endured in the Forties, exacerbated as they were by her mother's decline and eventual death in 1947, the poet's resilience and humor were largely unflappable. Moore's famous lines on a beleaguered strawberry from this period suggest the hopefulness that she maintained, and at what cost:

NEVERTHELESS

you've seen a strawberry
  that's had a struggle; yet
  was, where the fragments met,

a hedgehog or a star-
  fish for the multitude
  of seeds. . . .

The weak overcomes its
  menace, the strong over-
  comes itself. What is there

like fortitude! What sap
  went through that little thread
  to make the cherry red!

The observation of the cherry's miraculous redness was initially made by Moore's mother, and served as the impetus for the poem. Such input from the elder Moore was not uncommon; she was her daughter's first and most critical reader, offering praise, or condemnation, and suggesting revisions.

In the years following her mother's death—during which time Moore took solace from her brother, her friends, and from her faith—she continued to receive visitors, including W. H. Auden, whom she admired and whose Wednesday night Shakespeare classes she made a special effort to attend. Moore's hospitality never flagged throughout her long life. Donald Hall recounts a touching lunch visit to Cumberland Street in 1965 at which Moore, then in her seventies, suspecting that he was still hungry, poured a small pile of corn chips onto his tray. A known lover of health foods, she quipped: "I like Fritos. They're so nutritious." Hall was delighted. The witty congeniality conveyed by this anecdote is also the tonic chord of the *Selected Letters*; Moore's epistolary friendships, and her conscientious cultivation of them, confirm Williams's early characterization of this fiercely intelligent and compassionate poet: she was "our saint—if we had one—in whom we all instinctively felt our purpose come together to form a stream."

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edited by Richard John Neuhaus

FIRST THINGS

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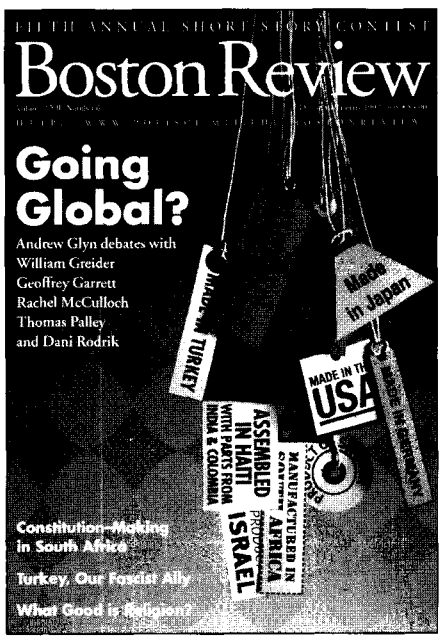

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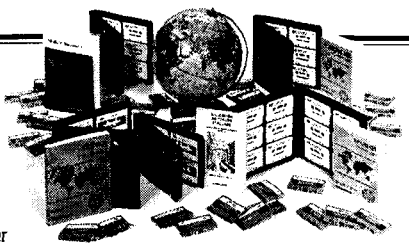

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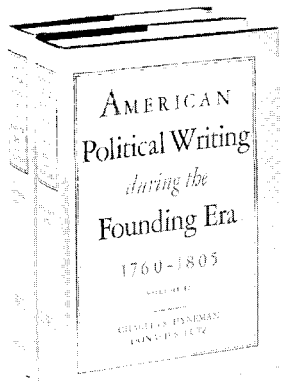

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